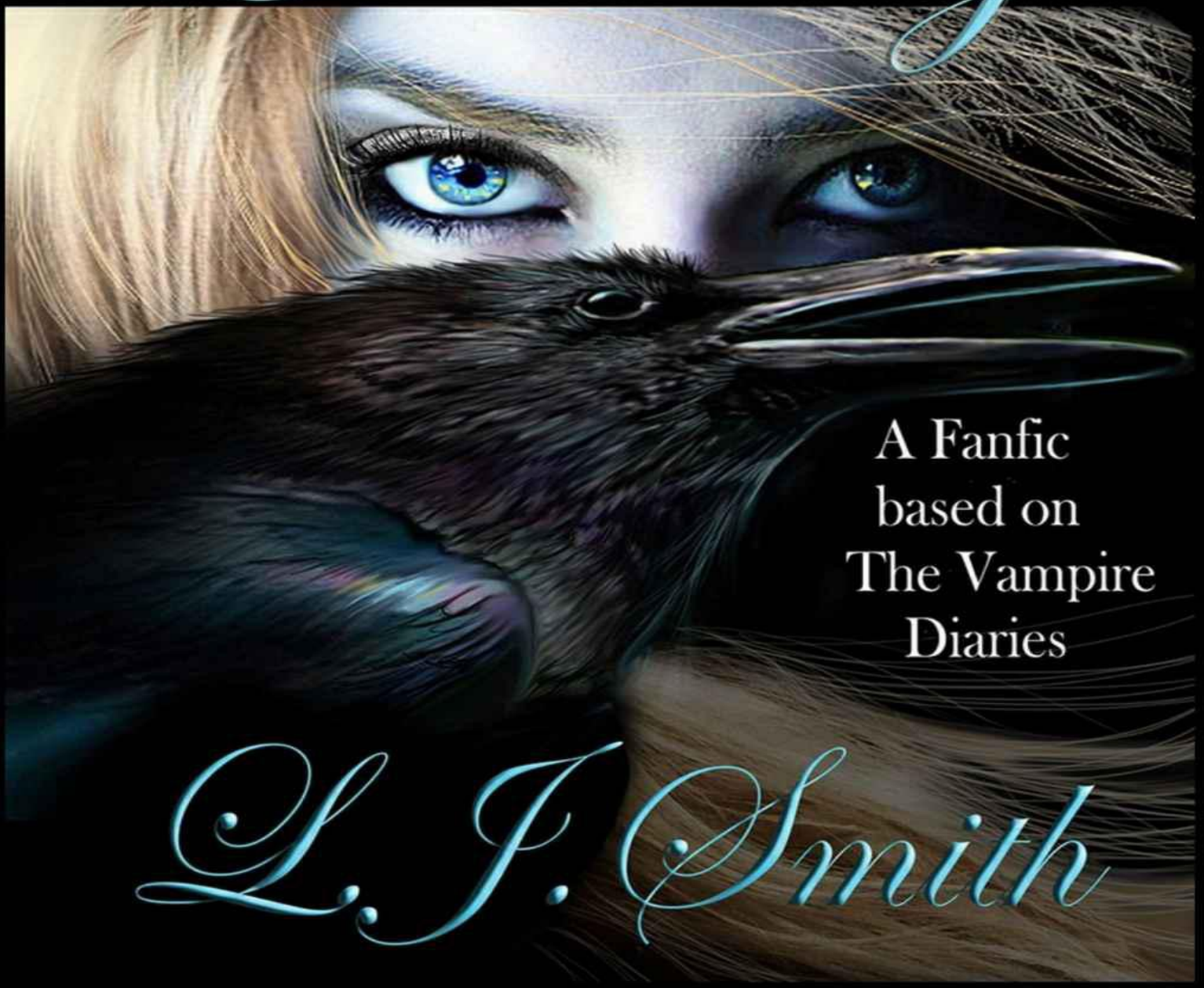
Evensong



A Fanfic based on The Vampire Diaries

L. J. Smith

New York Times #1 Bestselling Author

kindle worlds

Text copyright ©2013 by the Author.

This work was made possible by a special license through the Kindle Worlds publishing program and has not necessarily been reviewed by Warner Bros Entertainment Inc. and Alloy Entertainment, LLC.. All characters, scenes, events, plots and related elements of The Vampire Diaries remain the exclusive copyrighted and/or trademarked property of Warner Bros Entertainment Inc. and Alloy Entertainment, LLC., or their affiliates or licensors.

For more information on Kindle Worlds: http://www.amazon.com/kindleworlds

Evensong
Part One:
Paradise Lost
by L. J. Smith

Dedicated to my readers, worldwide. Thank you, friends,
for your many messages of kindness and appreciation.
Please let me know what you think of this fanfic!
@drujienna, info@ljanesmith.net, http://www.ljanesmith.net
https://www.facebook.com/ljsmithauthorofvampirediaries

Foreword by L. J. Smith

First of all, I would like to say that this is an episodic adventure fanfiction story. It is *not* one of the official books in *The Vampire Diaries* series, nor is it meant to replace these books. This fanfic takes place in an alternate world from the official books that follow *Midnight*.

What on earth is an episodic adventure story? It's a literary journey produced in sequential parts. These parts are not meant to stand alone, but they do each have an ending which relates back to the beginning and to the episode's major theme. In other words, this is just Part One of a story which will come out in *many* different parts. This is good or bad, depending on your POV.

I would also like to explain a little about this fanfic. It all began with a simple "what if" question, and one that I think you will be able to guess just a short way into the story. And then . . . well, as J.R.R. Tolkien famously said, "the tale grew in the telling." Almost before I knew it, Part One: Paradise Lost, was as long as any book in the original trilogy of *The Vampire Diaries*.

I can't even tell at the moment how many different parts there will be to this story, although I have known from the beginning how it will end. I also know such things as this: later in the work you will be seeing a very Gothic wedding—the bride wears black—held just at midnight in a half-ruined chapel in the woods behind Dalcrest College. And, no, I'm not going to tell who is marrying whom or why.

I have many readers who have written to me about how strongly they feel regarding which characters should get the most airtime in any *Vampire Diaries* fiction. I'd like to promise those on every side that this is a long, complex story. If you don't see enough of your favorite pairing in a particular episode (Bamon fans take note!), chances are that it will be coming up in the future. This is not because I can't make up my mind about who should end up with whom, but because I enjoy the chaos of the love quadrangles and more (quintangles? higher polygons?) that ensue when these particular characters get together.

Another thing: I have assumed that most people who read this work are already familiar with the characters and events of *The Vampire Diaries*. Still, I have provided some background information just for those readers who may never have picked up one of the books before. I'm aware, too, that most of the fanfics in Amazon's *The Vampire Diaries* section are based on the TV show. This one isn't. It's based on the books, which first came out back in the early 1990s. So if it shocks you to hear that Elena has fair hair and comes from the town of Fell's Church, or that Damon and Stefan are both around half a millennium old and were born in Renaissance Italy, this probably isn't the series for you. Or maybe it is. Maybe you'd like to see what the TV show was based on.

I would like to give my thanks to my agent, John Silbersack of Trident Media. You are reading this story because of his efforts, and if it is any good, he made it better.

My most sincere gratitude as well to Amazon and Kindle Worlds for giving me a place to house this fanfic and for welcoming me so warmly.

I would also like to thank Julie, Christina, Toni, Frini, Jesa, Jan, and Usok of Usok Choe Designs. Without them, I would never have been able to write a page of *Evensong*.

I do actually mean it when I say write to me to give your opinion of this episodic literary adventure. Please email me at *info@ljanesmith.net*. I may even write back to you! Or else visit me at *http://www.ljanesmith.net*, like me on Facebook at *https://www.facebook.com/ljsmithauthorofvampirediaries* or follow me on Twitter ***@drujienna***.

Lisa

Evensong
Part One:
Paradise Lost
by L. J. Smith

"The mind is its own place, and in itself can make
a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven…"
— John Milton

"Hey, mister?"

It was long after sunset. Damon Salvatore sat in a back booth of the most seedy and disreputable joint in all of Pine Grove, which was the most seedy and disreputable village to be found near Dyer, the little town that embraced Dalcrest College. He was reading the *Dyer County Herald.*

"Mister?"

Damon dipped his newspaper and looked over the top of his Ray Ban sunglasses at a young woman—a girl—a sort of moppet. She had dark olive skin and unnaturally brilliant scarlet hair in heavy, helter-skelter curls. You could mistake her for maybe sixteen if you fell for her round, ingenuous blue eyes or missed her ability to seem shorter and slighter than she actually was.

She brought to mind someone he cared about, who was genuinely small and fragile and had soft strawberry curls and a heart-shaped face. On the strength of that resemblance, he spoke to her.

"Yeah?"

The girl of sixteen, going on twenty-two, going on ageless, put her head on one side endearingly.

"Hey. Do you like to play pool, mister?"

"Nope." Damon retreated back behind the *Herald*. He was scanning the obituaries column—it was his way of keeping score.

There was a stainless steel hipflask on the rather sticky table, monogramed DS. Damon opened this and took a sip of dark, satiny Black Magic wine. Ah. Good year.

Bad week, though: no mention of cause of death, no mention, no mention in the obituaries. A murder, but not one of his, since it had happened the night before last and he could vividly recall not killing anyone then. A young woman, too. Weird that there was nothing about the murder in the headlines, but then this was werewolf country, which was why Damon was keeping score in the first place.

Aha! "After a brief illness"—but definitely one of his. He vividly recalled the three heavy, hairy bodies striking him from three directions at a few days ago in the Dyer woods. He also remembered the recoil in his arm as he drove a silver-edged switchblade into the largest wolf's brindled chest while two-inch-long fangs gnashed together just beyond his nose. Plus, he recognized the thirty-something face of the human that had appeared when the werewolf collapsed dead in the obit.

So "a brief illness" now encompassed death by a silver blade, he mused.

Something stirred at the bottom of his newspaper.

"Mister?"

It was the moppet again, peeking upward.

"I just thought," she said artlessly, twinkling her baby blue eyes, "that since you were sitting back here by the pool tables all alone, you might want to teach me something. My name is Kenzy." She smiled like sugared sunshine.

"Really," Damon murmured, noting with disappointment that she was neither a vampire nor a 'wolf on the prowl for meat. He couldn't teach the little hustler a proper lesson. But maybe . . .

"Okay, let's play!" he said, flashing a very brief—if dazzling— smile in the girl's direction. With Kenzy following him, skipping, if he didn't miss his guess, he went to gather a cue stick and a

cheap plastic drinking cup. An empty cup. And, from his front jeans pocket, a quarter.

He picked a table and put the quarter and the cup on the side rail less than an inch apart. Instead of racking up the balls that Kenzy was gathering, he took three, and then three more from her.

"Pay attention. There *will* be a pop quiz afterward," he told her briefly, as he deposited the six balls in the center of the table in a sort of butterfly shape. Without a pause, he casually dropped the cue ball in front of him, bent over and struck it sharply with the stick. It shot toward the colored balls, hit the middle two with a most satisfactory clunk and sent them flying in six directions, one to each of the six pockets of the table. The cue ball came back toward him, much diminished in speed. Damon tapped it from behind and it bounced up onto the quarter, then hopped into the plastic glass as if drawn there by magic.

"And *you*," he said solemnly to Kenzy, who was staring with a glazed expression at the empty table, "can keep this shiny bright quarter for your very own!"

He turned back toward his dim booth and had almost reached the *Herald* when he heard the belly laugh.

The "moppet" was uncoiling, standing up straight. Her wide, innocent eyes were transforming into a shrewd, direct gaze. Something had apparently been unsnapped because suddenly she had soft curves on top.

Moreover, as she continued to chuckle, the fullness of her lips made her look broadminded and good-humored.

"I was gonna tell you what you could do with your shiny bright quarter, but I just couldn't keep it together," she confided. "Damn; and I thought you were one of those stuck-up college kids. I hustle them all the time."

"Me, a college student?" Damon crossed his black jacketed arms over his chest and looked at Kenzy through the Ray Bans, frowning. He was seriously annoyed for the first time that night.

"You were reading a *newspaper!*"

"Oh. But that was just to—never mind. I guess it's true; I'm a martyr to my own

intellectualism." He tried on Stefan's brooding aura of loneliness and got another warm, deep chuckle for his pains.

"Nah, you're nothing like them," Kenzy said. "Can we start this conversation over, please? I'm Kenzy, and my answers to the quiz are: I've seen both those tricks done, but never in combination —and never so *fast*. I mean, *damn* fast!"

Damon looked her over, his eyes gravitating without volition to the sturdy, rounded throat that stood like a pillar now that the young woman wasn't crouching. His canine teeth began to ache pleasantly.

"All right," he said. "I'm Damon, and, yes, I'm pretty fast." He tried for a modest smile, but couldn't hold it, and went straight on to stunning without regret. "Shall we sit down?" He flashed a folded bill over his head as they did so.

The surly barkeeper seemed to have preternatural sight for any kind of money, and no eyes for anything else. He called, "What'll it be?"

"My friend would like . . ." Damon glanced at Kenzy.

"Oh, a rum and Coke," she replied. "You're not having anything?" she added when the bartender had come and gone.

"I'm leaving my options open," Damon said lightly, touching the flask with just the faintest quirk of his lip.

Fifteen minutes later, he was smiling a genuine sharp-toothed smile. Kenzy had turned out to be broadminded indeed. She was interested in unique experiences. He hadn't even had to Influence her in order to get her to tip her head back so that the sweet, sturdy column of her neck was bared.

It was definitely good to be back in the world of the upright and walking. In fact, it seemed almost ridiculous to think that only a few weeks ago he had been pretty much deceased. Undeath was a capital improvement, and for really savage kicks he had a large pack of werewolves to play with.

Nothing, he was certain, was going to prevent the next few weeks from being delicious.

* * *

Bonnie McCullough chewed her lower lip nervously. She was trying to do her Algebra 101 homework. Sort of. It was only the beginning of the third week of school and the homework shouldn't have been so intimidating, but she couldn't keep her mind on it.

Something awful is going to happen tonight, she thought.

She didn't know how she knew, but she was certain. *Almost* certain. She had been a witch for long enough to listen to her instincts in many cases. Between her grandmother's advice and old Mrs. Flowers' generous help, Bonnie had even got something of an education in the craft.

But she didn't know what to do now. If her terrifying intuition did happen to be wrong, it would spoil the night for everyone. And one thing that Bonnie had not learned—and suspected she could never learn—was to have the sort of confidence in her own opinion that Elena and Meredith had.

At least, she thought, some of her natural optimism returning to her, Elena would be out of danger. Bonnie knew that because she'd just gotten off the phone with Elena and Elena was on her way to Stefan's room. Stefan would die before allowing any harm to come to his beloved.

Now the only people that Bonnie had to fret about were Meredith, Matt, Caroline—and, well . . . *him*. The one she sometimes had trouble even naming in her own mind because it gave her inner shivers and made her eyes fill.

Damon, she thought in a sort of mental whisper.

* * *

Meredith Sulez sat with her back to Bonnie's back, at a small desk that was the mirror of her roommate's. She was trying to concentrate on her letter to her fiancé, Alaric Saltzman. It was a snail-mail letter because the village in the remote highlands of Scotland he was investigating had no Internet capabilities. Even to get on the telephone he had to visit the post office. There was always a little cluster of elderly people who amused themselves by listening to the half-shouted conversations of those who dared to touch that dangerous marvel of cutting-edge technology: the pay-phone.

So far the letter went like this:

Dear Alaric,

If you are reading this in front of other people, STOP! It's really quite private . . . sweetheart.

I hope you're safe and well. It's the start of week three for us, and we are all fine. Dalcrest College is very different from what we thought it might be when we so nobly gave up our scholarships in order to stay near Fell's Church and the many supernatural threats that seem to concentrate themselves there.

sigh

Honestly, though, I wish you'd come and investigate our hometown again. I'm sure it could use it, even if it seems quiet at the moment. And you might have a look at this college, too.

What is Dalcrest College like? How is it different from what we expected?

Well, for one thing, the campus began as an institute of higher learning back before 1900. The first dormitories were part of an old mansion that was bequeathed to a professor who had always wanted to start her own college.

I'm actually living in one of those dorm rooms now. All the girls are—and yes, this place is so old-fashioned that the dormitories are not coed. Some of the boys' dorms are built in what used to be the big house's stables.

In the classrooms, though, everything seems quite ordinary and modern. I don't know what I expected. Huge cobwebs and black candelabra hanging from the ceilings? (Actually, there are some candelabra in what used to be the entryway and great rooms of the old mansion. But they're not black and they've been converted to electric lighting.)

Of course, you already know about the one thing that's quite odd. At least you should if you got my previous letter (to which I am still waiting for an answer . . . dearest.) The campus is nestled snugly between the town of Dyer and Dyer Wood. The wood, of course, is where we . . .

She read the last paragraph over thoughtfully. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to be too specific. Alaric might be older than her, and have graduated from Duke, but sometimes he had a

ridiculous boyish habit of being careless with pieces of paper.

Besides, something was bothering her. The room was too quiet. Usually Bonnie hummed like an amiably off-tune bumblebee, or sang quite loudly—still off-tune—to the music in her ear buds, or else drummed her fingers when confronted by a difficult quadratic equation. Right now she was doing nothing of the kind. If she thought that Meredith didn't know she was worried, then she had another think—

"I do *not* need a cup of soothing chamomile tea," Bonnie said in tones of withering dignity.

Meredith turned around to see Bonnie's small stiff back, the shoulders hunched too tightly.

"I don't even *like* soothing chamomile tea," the petite redhead was going on, but Meredith crossed the few paces between the desks in their room and laid gentle hands on those fragile-looking shoulders.

"What about a backrub?" she suggested.

Bonnie just clutched at her strawberry curls. "I'm not that worried—I mean I *am*—and I'm sorry! There! Now I've started trouble and I don't even know anything for certain!"

Meredith tried to begin a gentle massage of the slender neck bowed in defeat. The muscles were so tightly cramped that she couldn't do anything to them without kneading hard with her strong hands and hurting Bonnie at first.

Instead, she flopped on her bed, gazing at the lacy homemade curtains that framed the darkness of the dorm room's window. She narrowed her eyes as she examined the curtain rod.

"Bonnie?"

A sniffle.

"Bonnie, talk to me! Come on, girl," Meredith said, bringing all her powers of persuasion to bear. "You're a witch and I'm a hunter-slayer and there is absolutely nothing that you can say that would startle me."

"I know," Bonnie replied wretchedly. "But that's the whole problem, isn't it? You'll believe me, Elena will believe me, Stefan will believe me . . . but I don't know whether *I* believe

me!"

"Well," Meredith said sensibly, "then you have to let us decide what to do about the prophecy on our own."

"Who said I had a prophecy?" Bonnie turned around at last, brown eyes wide.

"Well, you—I mean, if you didn't, then what are we talking about?"

"It's not a real prophecy or even a prediction. I didn't even trance—unless these Algebra word problems bored me into one."

"Well, what's wrong, then?"

"It's just a *feeling*. A stupid, stupid, stupid feeling I can't shake. I'm *scared*, is all. I keep thinking 'something awful is going to happen tonight' over and over." Bonnie put her head back on her desk.

"Something awful . . . but that's almost exactly—"

"I know!" Bonnie cried irritably. "We read Elena's diaries together, remember? It's how she started the very first of her . . . her *vampire* diaries! She wrote: 'Something awful is going to happen today!'—and it did!"

Meredith was surprised into sitting up straight. She found herself looking at her own reflection in the shadowed window, dark eyes, dark hair and serious expression all taken in at once. Then, abruptly, she jumped up on the bed and reached for something that lay hidden by the top ruffle of the curtains. It was lying on the curtain rod.

She brought out her fighting stave: a deadly spear made of ironwood, with tips that were embellished with tiny spikes of different sorts. It was lethal to vampires, werewolves, and humans, among many other nasty creatures. It had belonged, once, to her great-grandmother.

Bonnie was watching her wide-eyed.

"Elena's going to be safe tonight," Meredith said grimly. "She'll be with Stefan. And she'll keep an eye on him, so he'll be all right. That Damon will be fine goes without saying. Which leaves us with you and me and Matt—and Caroline, I guess."

"She crossed it out," Bonnie muttered, looking harassed.

"What? Caroline—?"

"No! Elena crossed it out, in her diary! She crossed it out after she wrote it."

Meredith was silent a moment. Then: "She got cold feet. Just the way you've got now. You need to believe in yourself, Bonnie. And if that crossed-out line wasn't a true prophecy, then I've never heard one. She met a crow right outside her front door."

* * *

Caroline Forbes frowned at the fingernail she was currently painting a deep iridescent duo-chrome green; the second coat of two. She liked green; it matched her eyes. She also liked her nails long. Of course that meant mastering the art of texting with the tips, and of using the fleshy pad of her pinkies to work on touch screens. That was fine; it was the price of beauty.

But just now she was feeling uncomfortable. Irritable.

And very, very pregnant.

She supposed she should be grateful it was just twins. She shifted position on her padded chair again. After all, most gray wolves had around five pups at once, and werewolf mothers commonly gave birth to triplets.

Caroline ducked her head just thinking about it, letting auburn hair for a moment blessedly cover her eyes.

There was no mirror in this room other than the makeup mirror on the vanity before her. Caroline shut the blinds regularly at sunset so that no darkened window could throw back her distorted reflection at her.

And it still wasn't enough! All Caroline had to do was look down at her ungainly stomach to be reminded that her fit, sinewy body was a thing of the past.

Worst of all, nobody seemed able to tell her when her new, gourd-shaped form would finally release its burden. Her father was influential enough to have gotten her a werewolf obstetrician, but the woman was an idiot. She could only shake her head and give speeches about how not knowing the

exact date of conception versus the exact date of conversion to wolvenkind made the birthdate so uncertain.

Caroline glanced around the dorm room with tears of self-pity prickling in her eyes. However, looking around only made the tears spill. She knew that all the pretty, expensive, softly harmonious things in the room had been bought by her parents—but they'd been actually set in order by Elena and Elena's entourage.

For that matter, she supposed *she* was one of Elena's entourage now. She couldn't help feeling *some* gratitude.

The fact that she was also one of three freshmen to get a dorm room to herself was, she knew, due entirely to Stefan and his ability to Influence the humans who ran Dalcrest.

Now why could vampires do that *and* change shape if they were powerful enough and werewolves could only change shape? And why did vampires get a choice in their shape-changing, while werewolves were stuck with the lupine thing?

Caroline sighed as she painted the last fingernail luscious green. Thinking about her wolf-shape made delicate *frissons* run up and down her spine. She wasn't ungainly in that form; it was impossible to tell that she was pregnant.

Maybe she would . . .

But, no. Not here—this small room would only frustrate the wolf in her. It wanted to run, to sniff the night air, to hunt and cavort under the starry night. It wanted to leap through an open window and race for the woods nearby, where Caroline had heard from her obstetrician that other creatures like her congregated of an evening. They would appreciate her beauty immediately, she felt sure.

It would be supremely unfair to force such an untamed animal to pace the narrow boundaries of the indoors.

Besides, her nail polish needed a clear top coat to make it smooth. A nuisance, but that was the price one paid for iridescent green glitter.

* * *

Matt Honeycutt glanced up at the hundred dollar bill he had framed and hung on his side of the dorm room. It was in memory of his Uncle Joe, who had given him a lot of advice—some of it good, and some pretty darn funny.

It helped him, right now, to stick to his studying, and to put aside regrets about that football scholarship at Kent State. He was here at Dalcrest to get a good education, even if it did sound as if everyone around him and in particular the guy directly above him was having a party.

For a moment Matt considered standing on his desk and thumping on the ceiling with his shoe, but he didn't want to be unfriendly. He tried to shut his ears to the racket instead.

Unfortunately, the hundred dollar bill and the distraction of the noise made him think about something else, something that he wanted desperately to keep out of his mind.

Elena.

That same hundred had figured largely in their first date, which had been in early autumn like this. It had become something of a talisman for them.

But now Elena was with Stefan.

Well, at least she wasn't with Damon. A little more than a month ago, Matt had been very unsure about her intentions. He couldn't help the sharp breath he took, at the very thought of Damon. Damn! Just when you think that a guy is good and dead and ought to stay that way; couldn't happen to a nastier fellow, he's suddenly back alive and more arrogant than ever.

But of course Stefan had been devastated by his older brother's death. And sorry, *Mutt*, a voice in Matt's head seemed to say, but Elena was the same way, and Bonnie, too. That was why Damon wasn't still resting in peace.

All right, stop thinking about that, he told himself. No point in getting worked up over a fanged loser like Damon. Elena had made it perfectly clear that it was Stefan she loved, and Stefan was Matt's best friend.

Matt sighed and re-opened his trigonometry textbook, which had fallen closed. He tried to make sense of the same equation he'd been reading over for twenty minutes, but he couldn't shut out

the booming around him of bass notes, like drums in his head.

He wondered vaguely when his roommate would show up. The guy was going to be pretty seriously behind in classes if he didn't turn up soon. Matt hoped he wouldn't want to party all night when he did arrive.

* * *

Elena Gilbert stuck to the shadows. She was sneaking into Stefan's dormitory, Gibson Hall, where—unbelievably—girls were not allowed after 9:00 P.M.

It was more than twenty minutes after that already, so she couldn't even hope for Plan A, which had been to swim upstream against the flow of other girls coming out and eventually make a sharp right turn at the top of the second staircase landing.

That meant it was time for Plan B, which was to be a boy and simply strut her way in. Elena pulled a dark blue wool cap from the double pocket in the front of her navy hoodie. She coiled her hair—it was getting a little too long now, she noticed—wrapping it tightly into a bun with one hand while holding the cap in front with the other. Eventually, somehow, the hair ended up inside the cap, and on the top of her head rather than the back. It wasn't really cold enough to justify the cap; the trees hadn't yet begun to change color. Elena pulled her hood up over her head far enough to put her face in shadow.

The hoodie was generous in cut, so as to conceal the curve of her hips. In addition, she was wearing baggy Levis and scuffed gray high-top Nikes.

A decent disguise, or so her mirror had indicated. Or course, nothing would have been easier than asking Stefan to come to her room tonight. He could Influence anyone who saw him to let him by. But where was the thrill in that?

Just now Elena's heart was racing, her mind was pounding, and she felt shaky with adrenaline. This might be a decent disguise, but was it actually going to work? What would happen if she got caught? It would all depend on the nature of the guy who caught her, and Elena had practical reasons to be wary of relying on some strange guy's good nature.

Her ruminations made Elena huddle farther back into her hood and concentrate on walking like a short tough guy. A short human tough guy, she amended silently, since both Stefan and Damon walked like jungle cats on the prowl: silent, stealthy and graceful. Non-vampire guys with attitude were more or less a mixture of swagger and stagger.

Elena clenched her fists, set her face in a ferocious scowl, thrust her chin out and . . . got into Gibson Hall and all the way up the first flight of stairs before disaster struck.

Two freshmen who were arguing about something, doing a very much more realistic job of beetle-browed scowling than she could ever hope to, stopped talking suddenly as she passed. Elena increased her swagger and her pace, hastened up the stairway, but it was no good. She could *feel* them following her. If her ears hadn't been so muffled by hair and cap and hood she might have heard them. But it was the feeling of *where* they were looking that really infuriated her. It was a bit she was trying very hard not to sway, and which seemed to have a mind of its own at the moment.

Elena put her hand out to make certain and noted that the balustrade trembled under their heavy steps. She made it to the first landing and then stopped to confront the pair who had just reached the top of the staircase.

One of them examined her lecherously, not at all put off by the shapeless clothing. "Hey, babe, where're you going?" he asked, leering. "You got a special friend to see after curfew?"

Elena gazed at him coldly. "My personal life is none of your business."

The lecher didn't look at all put out. "Hey, baby cakes, we can make you forget all about your friend, can't we?" He elbowed the second guy, who was burly and much more taciturn.

"Yeah," Burly said shortly.

The lecherous one kept coming toward Elena, smirking all the while. "C'mon, babe, let's be friends. Let's be *close* friends. What do you say to getting closer?"

Elena shrugged. "If you really want it . . ."

"I do, I *do*," he said enthusiastically. "Now, just come over to my room, okay? Or do you want some help?"

As he reached out to grab her by the shoulder, Elena grasped the palm of his extended hand with her fingers. She then twisted his hand inward and back under his armpit. His palm ended up facing outward, and he yelped as the bones of his forearm were rotated against his elbow.

Instantly Elena applied pressure, turning the lecher's arm in a direction it was never meant to go. He gasped, in too much pain even to yell again. His eyes bulged at her.

Elena knew that with *enough* pressure she could break the radius and ulna, tearing tendons and muscle. Or she could dislocate the lecher's elbow. But Meredith had been very specific about controlling opponents without permanently damaging them, if possible. Elena settled for sweeping the guy's feet from under him while he was off balance and his mind was fixed solely on how his elbow joint was going to snap.

He fell and didn't get up again, but lay cradling his sore arm and whimpering.

The taciturn guy was already rushing toward Elena, and he was much taller and heavier than she was.

Perfect, she thought.

She dropped easily into a position with her right leg in front of her, slightly bent at the knee and relaxed. As Burly reached her, spreading out both arms to crush her in a bear hug, she gripped the neck of his T-shirt on the right side with her left hand and grabbed his left wrist with her right hand.

The rest happened so fast it was a blur. Elena broke the burly guy's balance by pushing him right and to the front. She then moved so that her right foot blocked his right ankle, at the same time bending her left leg slightly.

Burly tried to get his balance back by coming forward. Elena used his own energy to trip him over the back of her blocking ankle by straightening her right leg and pulling with her left hand while driving with her right.

Cool! He tumbled over just as Meredith had done when she had made Elena practice this move over and over during the last three weeks. He crashed quite heavily into the wall and after that seemed to lose all interest in the proceedings.

Elena was so far into the zone that when a third figure came flying at her very fast, she almost assisted him clean over her shoulder. She managed to stop herself in time, which was good because it was Stefan.

He had obviously come to rescue her—in fact, he'd undoubtedly been tracking her aura all the way from her own room in Soto Hall. Now, however, he seemed to see a glint in her eye as she relaxed back into the depths of her hoodie.

"Good work," he murmured, managing to look properly awed, and then he clearly took in her disguise, and added, "Um . . . damn! Is that—that's Elena in there, right?" He made a show of peering into her hood, apparently not noticing the fact that he was simultaneously holding her hand and urging her up the next staircase. Of course, he could see in midnight darkness like a cat, and the slight shadow of her hood offered not the slightest protection from his visual acuity.

"It had better be," Elena mused, "since you seem to be taking me to your bedroom. In quite a hurry, I might mention. I hope you're not doing that with random girls in disguise—or with random short boys, either."

Stefan gave her a longsuffering look. "Of course not," he breathed. "They're never random; they all look a lot like you."

Elena snorted and murmured in a sing-song voice, "I know someone who's not getting *anything* tonigh-hight."

"It was a joke; a joke!" Stefan said hastily. After a moment's thought, he added, "Actually . . . um . . . I got a glimpse of your face when you were taking care of those bad guys. Um, it was just a quick glimpse—but I know you so well . . ." He was clearly trying to cover all his bases.

Elena couldn't help it; she smothered a chuckle into her sleeve. "So how much of the fight did you see?" she whispered.

Stefan gave her a sideways glance. "A fair bit. Well, all of it really. Mostly all—but maybe there was more at the beginning that I wasn't there for. . . ."

"You came to rescue me when I first noticed that they were behind me," Elena translated,

resigned.

"Yes and no. Mostly yes. But you really were magnificent back there. Meredith's a fine teacher."

"That's true." Elena cheered up suddenly. "You know, she taught me a whole different set of pressure points for . . ." She clicked her teeth together meaningfully. "Your kind."

"Oh. Right. Yes, Damon's showed me pretty much the entire spectrum."

"He did? Damon? That's weird; I'm surprised he would take the . . ." Elena's voice trailed off. "Oh."

"Yes."

Elena felt anger rushing up inside her like steam. Damon had been beating Stefan up, hunting him, and humiliating him for centuries. "Remind me to remind him of a few pressure points the next time I see him."

"It doesn't matter now. Really. And he's stopped ever since he, er, came back. If I didn't know better, I'd think he's genuinely grateful."

"He should be; it took enough work," Elena murmured absently. They had reached Stefan's floor and stopped on the landing and she noticed they were getting some odd glances. "Stefan? I think we should stop holding hands now."

Stefan took a quick look around, and then shrugged, squeezing their interlaced fingers. "Let them think what they want," he said, and for the first time that night she glimpsed his sweet, wickedly handsome smile. "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Elena twisted her wrist, slipping her hand free. "Yes," she said in a voice that she knew no one other than her demon lover could hear. "But what about guys who *really* have to sneak around just because this place has such old-fashioned regulations? They may end up getting in trouble or—or even rusticated if we act like we're totally flaunting the rules."

Rustication meant losing your room and maybe also the right to continue classes. Of course, having a *female* in your room after 9:00 P.M. would lead to the exact same thing, which was why

Elena had felt that sneaking in would be an adventure in the first place. Now she suddenly and heartily wished she hadn't done it.

Stefan was still reacting to her last statement, wincing. "Of course you're right. I'm an idiot."

"Wrong," Elena barely whispered, "I'm the idiot."

"You? You always champion the underdog."

"No, it's just that I got a little taste of alienation when I was . . ." Elena clicked her teeth again, very gently. "Your kind. It taught me things I needed to learn—but not enough, obviously," she finished under her breath.

They drew abreast of the odd-glancers. Elena set her face in its most pugnacious frown and walked with her most boyish lack of grace. It wasn't going to be enough, she realized with a sinking feeling. The glancers had become starers and Elena was under serious scrutiny.

"Hey," one of the starers said. "It's not a—" And he used a term which made Elena want to put pressure just behind his jaw and keep it there until he screamed. "It's a girl!"

"Salvatore," another of the starers said mock-reproachfully, "having a girl in your room at this hour will get you suspended—unless you share." He leered.

"That's right," the final starer said. "You have to share her with us. In my room—right here, right now. You got that?"

"No," Stefan replied coolly. "I have a better idea. You three are going to forget that you ever saw me tonight—and certainly forget that you saw her."

The three freshmen started to laugh at that in the rudest possible manner, when suddenly their expressions turned into blankness. They froze, staring now at the wall. Then, all three of them shut their eyes.

Elena watched, furious with herself. Because she'd wanted a thrill, Stefan had been forced to work like this. She knew how much effort it cost him. He wasn't a predator like Damon, drinking the blood of young women each day. He stuck to animal blood, which gave far less Power. That

meant that he was using up precious energy right now Influencing these three jerks instead of keeping it for simple living.

Well, there was one way to make that up to him, and Elena smiled a little while still berating herself. Stefan did drink the blood of one particular human girl: herself. Usually he only took a ceremonious mouthful so that their souls could merge together and they could talk without words.

But Meredith had taught her how to access a dozen vampire pressure points. One of those might be just the thing to help Elena make up his loss of energy.

Elena's smile deepened as Stefan opened the door to his room. She slipped inside, while the three stooges in the corridor stared with open mouths into the distance. The last she saw, they were starting to drool vacuously.

* * *

Stefan followed Elena into his room. He was breathing quickly, not because he was excited to see her—although he was—but in order to oxygenate his blood and raise his level of Power.

He and Elena shared a brief, fierce smile and then she walked over to the bed in the stark little room. It was a single bed, but it had been luxuriously fitted out with a heavy velvety spread custom-made for it. Elena stopped, blinking as she looked at it. Stefan saw that she recognized the painting it was based on, which had been done by George Frederick Watts back in the 1800s.

In a black oval on the dark green background, a girl in a brown dress with long fair hair flowing down her back was pictured. She was surrounded by climbing wild red roses, most of them fully opened, some just in bud. The girl was holding one of the living wild roses to her face, as if breathing in its fragrance. At the bottom a small scroll read *Memoriam*, Latin for Memory.

Elena swung around. "Stefan! That's my favorite picture. It's the one from Alkemia's shop on Etsy online—they make that perfume you like so much, that has Heirloom roses and balm of Gilead in it."

"And just the faintest touch of smoke, the tiniest scattering of ashes," Stefan said quietly, remembering. "It's the scent of love . . . and loss. Of tears, maybe. Balm of Gilead is supposed to

soothe away tears."

Elena was watching him closely. "Are you . . . sad, Stefan? I mean—I guess I mean, are you sorry we came to Dalcrest?"

"How can I be sorry about anything when I'm with you?" Stefan asked. He meant every word. Elena was dressed in a way that only she would dress for a rendezvous, for their first *liaison* in over two weeks. He couldn't help smiling as he watched her pull off her wool cap and let the brilliance of her hair spill out.

She was meant to be a boy, he was guessing. She was wearing clothing that a boy might wear, and he didn't doubt that she thought it was loose enough to cover up her betraying femininity.

The only problem was that somehow the deep blue hoodie and the oversized Levis were working against her. She gave the vague impression of a small, rebellious tomboy who'd been ordered to put on a frilly pink dress she disdained for a photo, and had turned up in her older brother's clothes instead. She was . . . quaint.

And she was starting to frown. Elena didn't miss much and her vibrant golden aura was turning icy blue with suspicion.

"Sorry to ogle you," Stefan said, hiding any shade of a smile.

Elena's lip quirked. "Oh, you're ogling me in this, are you? I suppose I really should have bound up my bosom—although, A: to be honest, I'm not exactly sure how you do that; and Two: I don't know any way to bind up my *hips* without wearing Spanx or something and that I absolutely refuse. I mean, the name itself is degrading."

"True," Stefan said judiciously. He couldn't help but add, "A and Two?"

"Oh, yes. They're just part of different arguments. I got all the way from A to Z and then started using those little Roman numerals in my full discussion about merchandise degrading to women. It was my first assignment in Nonfiction and Memoir Writing, and it took forever to finish."

"I did wonder why you wanted that class," Stefan said. He had been the one to Influence the chief technician who handled Dalcrest College's computers. He'd made sure that all of the students

from Fell's Church got the courses they wanted. For that matter, he'd had to Influence the same woman twice. The first time had been to get Elena and Meredith and Matt and himself into the college in the first place, since they had only decided on joining Bonnie and Caroline at the end of summer.

"I mean," Stefan added, "given all the writing you do in your diary."

"Yes, well, that's the only place I can tell the whole truth," Elena said, sounding not so much bitter as resigned. "In regards to what actually happened this last year. Our Memoirs assignment for next week is to write something about what we did over the summer. And I can't help thinking what the teacher's face would look like if I brought up, say, how we managed to get Damon . . . back again. I mean, it's that or me and the adventures of my vampire boyfriend."

Stefan stilled. He had moved over to the plain mahogany dresser that had come with the room, along with his single bed and nightstand.

"Elena? Are you . . ." he began slowly.

"Don't," Elena interrupted. "Don't even, Stefan. Don't you *dare* ask if I'm sorry, or sad, or having second thoughts. Not when I'm happier than I've ever been in my life."

Stefan's heart quickened. Elena always said exactly what she meant—except when what she meant actually meant something private. He wished she had put a "with you" in the sentence about being so happy. He could remember too vividly how grieved she had been while Damon had been absent.

"I am happy," Elena said carefully and precisely, "because you love me and I love you more than anything in all the worlds. And, yes, I helped to get Damon back, and, yes, I care for him. But it's always been us, Stefan. You and I. It always will be us."

She held out her arms to him, with a look of such sweet yearning on her face that it was all Stefan could do not to enfold her immediately. But his hand was touching a box on the dresser and he knew that in a few minutes there would be no more talking. If he was going to say anything about objects in the world, it would have to be now.

"I wish I had gotten the black rose with the spell of humanity on it," he whispered. "But you are a sort of rose to me. The bedspread is for you—I'll bring it to your room whenever you like. And . . . I had this made, too."

He put the black velvet jewel box in her hand. It had arrived just a little while ago—not by mail, but by an obsequious and ceremoniously formal gentleman, a vice-president of the jewelers who had custom-crafted the item inside for him.

Elena's eyes widened at the sight of the box, which was too big to contain a ring. She didn't pretend she wasn't curious about it. She opened it immediately, and then drew in her breath.

"It's not quite what Lucen could have made of it," Stefan said, remembering the soft-spoken master jeweler of the Dark Dimension. "But it means that you're my rose in darkness. You're my memory—the one memory I want to keep."

Slowly, Elena drew the necklace out of the box. The pendant's front was covered with literally hundreds of black diamonds and rubies, which formed the image of a red rose, full blown, against a background of midnight. Different colors in the rubies, which ranged from deep burgundy to crimson to damask, gave the rose an almost three-dimensional quality.

"Stefan . . ."—very low.

"It's a locket," Stefan said, feeling ridiculously shy. Elena's lips parted as she opened the tiny catch. Inside was a picture of Elena that Meredith had provided him. Her lapis lazuli eyes looked frankly into the camera, and her lips were laughing.

On the other side was a picture that Stefan had had taken in a little shop back in Fell's Church. He had felt just as shy having it taken as he did now, knowing Elena was gazing at it.

"It's wonderful," Elena said softly. "It's a perfect present. I love it, and I love you." She closed the locket, turning so that he could fasten the chain around her neck. "And now we're kissing —our pictures, inside."

When she turned back, the rose shimmering in darkness hanging around her neck, Stefan took her in his arms.

* * *

Mrs. Theophilia Flowers swirled her teacup three times widdershins—counterclockwise—while holding it in her left hand. Carefully she poured the small amount of tea left in the cup into its saucer.

With the handle of the cup pointing toward herself, the questioner, she examined the bits of tea leaves that remained on the white bottom.

Her white brows drew together and her lips pursed very slightly. Untidy. Untidiness in the leaves meant untoward matters in life.

Worse, there were bits of leaf on the very bottom of the cup, and that foreshadowed misfortunes. They were predominantly to right of the handle, meaning that the problems were coming in the future. Worse, there were distinct drops of tea left despite the emptying of the cup, which represented tears.

Many tears in the future. But not the far future; the leaves were so close to the handle that the trouble was coming very soon. Perhaps even tonight.

A short stalk was crossed by a longer one overlying it. It was a woman or girl in danger, from a man or boy. Yet the detritus at the bottom of the cup resembled nothing so much as an eight-pointed star, which indicated an accident—or possibly a reversal of fortune.

Mrs. Flowers studied the color of the short stems in the cup industriously. No question about it; most had been lightened to a rich gold. The trouble was coming to the only girl Mrs. Flowers knew with hair that shade: Elena. Yet there were other short stems, randomly scattered, that were dark brown or reddish. Meredith and Bonnie were both going to experience great hardship as well.

The long stem that crossed the golden one had somehow darkened until it was pure black. The boy causing the misfortune had hair that color.

But which one? Mrs. Flowers wondered. Was it Stefan or Damon who posed such a dire threat to Elena? She wished that the leaves would indicate hair contour as well as color, since Stefan's hair was wavy while Damon's was quite straight.

At first blush, it would seem that there was no question about which young man might do Elena harm. Mrs. Flowers missed Stefan deeply. He was the one who had brought her out of the unsociable bitterness that had brought her to the brink of abusing the craft and hating all of humankind. Now that he was gone, her house seemed far too quiet and empty, and she was left to remember the days when it had been full of young people and laughter and excitement.

And sorrow, too. Much as she loved Stefan, the old woman could not help but recognize that the very intensity of the love between him and Elena might lead to darkness and folly. It had already done so in the past.

Of course, so had the passion of the chemistry between Elena and Damon, she thought. Damon's obsession with his younger brother's beloved and Elena's unthinking response had led directly to disaster. But that seemed far more deliberate on Damon's part, and Mrs. Flowers was looking for an accident.

Young men, she thought, with an involuntary sigh. It was quite true, what dear Ma*ma* had always said: they seemed to have been born under a different sun from the bright Sol that nurtured female creatures. And as for young men who avoided the sun whenever possible and drank blood instead of eating good hearty meat . . . well! Not even dear Grandmama, who had been a witch of great renown, always knew how to deal with them.

However, it never hurt to ask her advice, as well as that of dearest Ma*ma*. Mrs. Flowers put her teacup down with an air of finality. She settled back in her chair and shut her eyes, willing herself to relax until the doors of the spiritual realm opened for her.

* * *

Damon and his new best friend sat in the dim booth until the wee hours, Kenzy drinking rum and Cokes and nibbling on peanuts, and Damon drinking Black Magic with the occasional nibble on Kenzy.

Then, just as Damon began to put a fang to Kenzy's soft brown throat for the third time, just as his canines were at their sharpest and most sensitive, a psychic scream split his universe.

It was long, it was loud, and it was painful. In addition, it was addressed directly to him, which meant that absolutely no one else in the world was sharing his misery. When Damon was unhappy, he liked to spread the anguish around liberally.

But the really, really bad thing was that he couldn't just ignore the scream, picking up where he had left off his date with Kenzy's vein. He *couldn't*. Because now his entire body was thrumming with fury. He recognized the screamer as clearly as if she were sitting in the booth with him.

Damon was cynically curious about exactly what he was going to do to the person who had made her call to him.

She belongs to me, he sent out on a heavy wave of Power and on all frequencies, including the one the scream had come on. *It might not be obvious, but she is mine. Touch her again and die.*

Silence. But there was nothing at all to prevent Damon from tracking the call back to its origin.

That was exactly what he did.

* * *

Killing Elena . . . completely by accident . . .

If there was a single nightmare that had woken Stefan from his sleep more than any other, it was the one he'd had the first night after he'd seen her.

It went something like this:

He was holding Elena, Elena the high-school senior, the radiant girl of only seventeen summers. Somehow he had explained what he was to her, and somehow she had been able to accept it, to accept *him*, and even to glory in the way it could join their minds like two candle flames merging.

When he was awake he was far too ashamed to ever imagine breaking his vow of drinking only animal blood. However, his sleeping visions were daring, audacious.

In the beginning of this nightmare, he was drinking Elena's blood and he was *very* deep inside her mind. He could feel a response to his love so profound it shook him to sinew and bone.

The feeling made him realize that the purpose of his entire life had been to find Elena, to love Elena, to be loved by her.

We'll stay just like this, Elena told him without spoken words, and he could feel her shiver with terrible joy as she discovered telepathy.

Yes, we will, he sent back to her gently. *Whatever you want, love—that's what we'll do.*

That was when the dream changed.

It began with a dull realization that he and Elena had been reveling at the peak of rapture for a very long time. For . . . an exceedingly long time. He had lost himself and Elena had never uttered a whisper of complaint. But . . . but . . . for exactly how long had he been drinking? How much blood had he drawn out? Oh, please, God, not enough to harm her.

He was so unfamiliar with the ecstasy that came with taking any kind of human blood that he couldn't judge at all.

He had to stop. Now!

In his dream, Stefan did manage to make himself stop, to sever the blood-bond and lift his head from Elena's slim white neck. The sudden feeling of separation was shocking, like stepping naked into a storm of icy sleet. But that didn't matter.

What was important was that the last physical response he felt from Elena was the sensation of her arms around him, trying to renew the link between them.

"No," he whispered. "No, love. We can't; not now. In fact, I was getting frightened that we'd already—"

Elena's arms slipped away from him and fell, limp, to either side.

After which Stefan found to his horror that he was holding a girl who lay like a white swan shot from the sky. Her lapis-blue eyes were open but unseeing; her lips parted but stirred by no breath. Her skin was pale as chalk. Her glorious hair swept down to trail on the floor. Worst of all, her vibrant aura had been snuffed out; extinguished.

"No!" he shouted in the nightmare. "Elena—no! Come back!"

With typical nightmare sluggishness, Stefan used a sharp wooden splinter to open an artery in his neck and tried to force some of the spurting blood into Elena's mouth. But he knew the truth already. Elena was *dead*—too far gone to even become a vampire.

Usually, Stefan woke then, sitting bolt upright in bed with a scream trapped in his throat. Tonight, however, there was no such merciful awakening.

Because tonight what happened wasn't a nightmare. It was real.

He was holding Elena in his dorm room at Dalcrest College and Elena's skin was as white as the stark white sheets of his bed, except for the two little puncture wounds in her throat. They were ruby-colored. Literally. Human blood was the shade of a ruby held to the light.

Stefan had gotten lost in the fog of passion of biting this new Elena, the human girl of eighteen summers, who had been returned by the Celestial Court to live an ordinary life. And now . . .

. . . he had murdered her. In truth.

He could just make out the echoes in his mind of her last thought to him.

Stefan . . . this was my fault . . . not yours. Please . . . I'm not afraid . . .

And then, in heartbreaking tones:

Dream of me now and then . . . nothing is ever really forgotten . . .

Stefan Salvatore stared down at Elena Gilbert, boneless in his arms, exactly like a beautiful white bird shot from the sky. He made no effort to slash his throat. He knew it was useless. It was useless even to call her name, although he found himself doing that, over and over, with mind and voice.

Elena did not, could not respond.

Fragments of pointless, pathetically cliché thoughts floated through Stefan's head. Please, let this not be happening . . . I never meant any harm . . . Elena wanted it so much . . . she was so happy . . . I would never hurt her!

Yet he was swollen with Power, filled with a dangerously high percentage of the

bloodstream of the young woman he loved. The enormous energy of the Power sickened him. Used as he was to the bare-sustenance stimulation of animal blood, Stefan found that Elena's donation brought every sense, every emotion into appalling clarity.

Moreover, the unique flavor of Elena's blood still filled his mouth each time he swallowed. That was unbearable.

Frantic, Stefan tried to dissipate some of his Power into the atmosphere, but he simply had too much. He was going to be sick. He wanted to die.

Then—all at once—he sensed something that made everything else completely irrelevant. Through his increased Power, he suddenly detected what he had imagined to be impossible.

A heartbeat.

Elena still had a pulse: intermittent and hideously faint, but clear in his mind. Her heart was contracting feebly, still fighting for her. She was even trying to breathe, although the movement of her lungs was almost imperceptible even to him.

Without a thought, Stefan began to use his Power to aid Elena's laboring organs. He helped them to do their job more efficiently. It didn't bring any of Elena's aura back, but it did keep oxygen flowing to her brain.

Wait, a small voice inside him suddenly counseled. *Think! There are two ways you might save her!*

For one instant Stefan sat perfectly still. He could see two futures equally clearly before him. In the first, he did what he had done in his nightmare and opened an artery for Elena to drink. His blood would be potent in her nearly exsanguinated body, and she would die and change into a vampire instantly and forever.

In the second, he did something different. He kept Elena's heart and lungs working until he could get her to a hospital set up to give immediate transfusions. The small Dalcrest College clinic was out of the question. That meant he had to get Elena to Mercy Havenwick Hospital in Campbell, ten miles away.

In that scenario, Elena might come out of this as a living, breathing human girl, not as some heartbreakingly innocent undead thing.

It took only a moment for Stefan to decide. The only ethical choice was to try to save her as a human.

From that instant, his movements were swift, precise, and almost dispassionate. He enhanced the workings of Elena's heart and lungs so that she was breathing shallowly and her pulse remained steady. Then he stood and lifted her body in one motion, absently touching a finger to the markings on her throat. If she was to be an ordinary human, she could not afford to be the center of a debate about vampires. The little wounds healed at his touch. He flung the door open and ran down the hallway with the long, easy strides of a predator. He was lucky; he had encounters with only three groups of open-mouthed students on his way to the parking lot. Without pausing, he Influenced them all to have seen nothing of him carrying a beautiful dead girl.

In moments he had Elena in his black Porsche Panamera Turbo Executive. He broke just about every traffic law he had ever heard of in driving to the hospital, and collected an entourage of two police cars. That wasn't important. He could outrun them in this particular car. His reflexes were so much faster than the officers who were driving that he could lose them entirely if he wished.

He didn't wish. He didn't give a damn. He was going as quickly as he safely could already. And he was thinking desperately.

How could this have happened? If Elena lived, how could he explain to her? He had warned her when she had first discovered that he was a vampire that he would harm her through sheer unthinking force. Back then, Elena had been no more afraid than she'd been tonight. She had come to him in all gentleness, and had defeated the raging beast that he could feel inside his head.

After that, though, he'd done things to that beast within himself. He had chained it—or at least he thought he had. He had set up a system of checks and balances that were supposed to cut in and awaken his conscious mind if he stayed too long at Elena's throat.

How, then, had it happened? *How?* How could he have brought Elena to this hideous state?

She was his world, his heaven on earth. She was all he wanted of heaven, and all he could ever have. Damon's coma had not been death, and Stefan remained grimly convinced that vampires were, in fact, damned to simply lose their souls when they died.

How could he have fallen so far into hell, then, that he had almost killed the one human creature he adored?

How could he be certain it wouldn't happen again?

Stefan realized that he was gripping the steering wheel almost hard enough to break it. He tried to ease up pressure, but it seemed that he needed to cling to something, and that something could not be Elena.

If human transfusions succeeded in saving her life . . . how could he ever dare to touch her again?

Stefan's throat ached. His eyes felt dry and hot. He was remembering a plan he had made back when both he and Elena were going to Robert E. Lee High School, from the days when he had just emphasized to Elena how dangerous he would be as a boyfriend. The plan had been beautiful in its simplicity.

He had decided back then that if he ever actually became a threat to Elena that he would do what he had early sworn to her he would never do, and severely Influence her mind.

He would Influence her to forget him entirely and turn back to her ex-boyfriend Matt. Matt still loved her; Matt would always love her. And Matt was a Virginia gentleman in his blood and bones. He would be strong enough to protect Elena from outside dangers, and he would never have to fight his own impulses, as Stefan did when he wanted to hold her tightly and yet not crush her.

God, he had been naïve back then, Stefan realized. That had been before he realized that Damon was in Fell's Church, and that he had already staked his own claim on Elena. It had been before Katherine, before Klaus, before the malach had appeared in the Old Woods, before the twin fox-spirits had imprisoned Stefan in the Dark Dimension. It had been before Stefan had realized that the ley lines which crisscrossed the haunted ground of Elena's hometown were broadcasting a beacon

to attract poisonous creatures from hallway around the world.

Any one of those creatures had been savage enough to have ploughed right through Matt without even noticing him.

Matt couldn't keep Elena safe, either. Who was strong enough to protect her from monsters? Stefan asked himself.

No one who wasn't a monster already.

A street sign brought him out of his daze of automatic driving. Havenwick Drive. He made a sharp right turn at the light, noticing that he'd picked up another police cruiser. The three wailing cars followed him to the entrance to the emergency room—the emergency department, as doctors called it.

He parked in the space marked *Ambulance Only* and ran around to open the passenger door, where Elena had slumped down over her seatbelt.

"GET AWAY FROM THE CAR! DO IT NOW! *Kneel on the ground with your hands on your head!"* shouted a deep, authoritative female voice from one of the cruisers that had screeched to a stop behind him. He cast a tendril of Influence at its occupants, at the same time shouting, "This girl is dying! She needs help *now!"*

He lifted Elena and turned toward the emergency department doors. Two male voices bellowed for him to stop, and he sent out more tendrils, calming the nervous officers, replacing their fear and suspicion with trust and the desire to help.

All the commotion had attracted startled workers from inside the hospital. Two men ran out piloting a mobile stretcher, shouting at Stefan to place Elena on it.

Once he did, the two men turned, running back through the waiting room toward the inner sanctum. But Stefan couldn't follow them inside; this hospital was a place human people lived and slept.

He called desperately: "Can I come with you?"

"Yeah, come on!" one of the men shouted before the automatic doors closed, and with this

invitation Stefan was able to enter the hospital. He Influenced anyone who could possibly have gotten a look at him, astonished by his ability to control multiple tendrils of Power at once. He blurred himself in human minds, leaving a faceless impression of dark hair and medium-tall stature.

He also planted the unyielding idea that whoever he was, he was allowed to be beside Elena; he knew that otherwise he'd be piloted away somewhere to answer questions and wait for results.

The commotion around Elena increased as she was taken into an emergency department bay and put on an examining table.

A group of people gathered around her as a man with close-cropped red hair and a clipboard asked Stefan, "What's her name? What's her relationship to you?"

"She's Elena Gilbert. She's a freshman at Dalcrest College, and she's my girlfriend."

Now a tall doctor with a streak of gray in her hair was looking at Elena's mouth and throat, examining them with a very bright penlight, listening to Elena's lungs. Stefan could pick thoughts out of the doctor's mind; among them *chest x-ray* and *intubation*. Stefan gently but relentlessly wiped these thoughts away. Elena would gain nothing from a test she didn't need or from being intubated.

Blood, he thought to the doctor. *She needs blood.*

"How old is she?" the red-haired man was demanding. "Who are her emergency contacts?"

"She's eighteen. Her emergency contact would be her Aunt Judith." Stefan telepathically sent the rest of the information directly into the questioner's mind and allowed him to write down the name and address. But he also added an unspoken imperative. No one would call the contact until Stefan himself gave the order to do so. He tacked a speck of Influence right onto the form itself, causing the information to blur, just as he was still keeping his face a blur in the eyes of all the medical personnel around him. He wasn't exactly sure why he was doing all this, but he went with his intuition that it was necessary.

"Elena? Elena, can you hear me?" called a slender, brown-skinned woman, also in a white coat. "Elena, can you open your eyes?"

Elena didn't respond.

Blood, Stefan thought again, reduced to pleading. *Just please give her blood!*

Questions were still being fired at him. "What happened to her? Has she ever passed out before?"

"I don't *know* what happened to her," Stefan lied, and forced belief into the minds of any hearers.

The tall doctor said, in a voice of controlled urgency: "Get her hooked up now!"

"What's her general health like?" the redhead demanded at the same time.

"She—she's always been healthy. Tonight—I just walked into her dorm room—she was waiting for me—I was supposed to meet her there. But her door was ajar and when I went inside I saw her lying on the floor, dead out. I grabbed her and headed this way."

The tall doctor was saying, "Get two large bore IVs in her! I want two liters normal saline wide open! And let's get her labs: blood type and cross, CBC, CMP, coags, UA, UDS, and a pregnancy test."

Stefan opened his mouth to say that Elena wasn't pregnant, but the redhead was saying, "You didn't call nine-one-one?"

"I thought she might be dead! I wasn't waiting an extra second!"

Now they were putting very large IV needles into the crooks of both Elena's elbows. Stefan felt his eyes fill with tears as they hung two bags of clear fluid over IV poles, their contents dripping through tubes into Elena's arms. Elena hated needles. She should be screaming in fury—but she might never make a sound again.

Because of him. Because he had lost control; because he was a monster.

"Is she pregnant?" the red-haired man asked sharply.

"No!" Stefan said, shocked and angered—and surprised at himself for both reactions, since they were doing a pregnancy test anyway. "She is definitely not pregnant!"

By this time Elena had been hooked up to machines that blinked and beeped and displayed

numbers. Her clothes had disappeared; she was wearing a hospital gown.

As everyone seemed to focus on the displays of the machines, a moment of silence descended.

Someone, somewhere said, "Mother of God." And then the hubbub came back. "Pressure's only forty over thirty!" "Pulses are *very* weak—thready—" "Extremities are cold and clammy!" "Extremely poor cap refill—" "But there's not a cut or bruise on her anywhere!" "And not a bloodstain, either—"

Stefan scanned the graying doctor's mind. *Need to get fluids into her right now,* the woman was thinking. *She's crashing!*

Yes, yes, Stefan thought. Elena needed fluids; needed blood specifically, but maybe saline solution would help. The red-haired man had disappeared, freeing up Stefan's mental resources, but a new doctor had entered the small room, and Stefan tensed as he glanced at the stranger's mind.

He was the trauma surgeon. He looked harmless, conferring quietly with the graying ED physician, but his job was to "open Elena up and look for leaks inside" and of all things Stefan did not want that. Elena wasn't leaking anywhere inside, and if this man operated on her he would kill her.

Suddenly words dragged him out of his brooding haze.

"—if we do that we can at least rule out ectopic pregnancy," the trauma surgeon was saying to the tall doctor.

"I agree," the woman said. "Let's get a pelvic ultrasound on this girl."

No, no, no! Stefan thought. Elena didn't need the test. She needed blood. Just blood. Why couldn't they see that?

At that moment the slender, brown-skinned doctor said, "Her labs are back! Her H and H is 4 and 14!"

Hemoglobin and hematocrit, Stefan's mind translated. Blood values at last—but so low! If not for his constant attention she would have been a corpse ten minutes ago.

The tall doctor sucked in her breath and said, “Call the blood blank; we need to activate an MTP right now.”

Stefan, just on the point of Influencing the doctor again, felt an almost painful wave of relief flood over him. A massive transfusion protocol. Blood for Elena at last.

Or not exactly blood, he realized, as he rifled through the tall doctor’s mind. Six units each of packed red blood cells, fresh frozen plasma, and random donor platelets.

But, he thought, when the doctors saw that Elena was hanging onto her progress as they pumped blood products into her they would keep giving her more.

For the first time, trembling inside with the fragility of the hope, Stefan allowed himself to believe that Elena might survive.

He wanted to kiss the tall graying doctor and the slender, brown-skinned doctor. He even wanted to kiss the mahogany cheek of the trauma surgeon, who had refrained from opening Elena up and killing her. But more than anything, with an anguish that he had to dampen to endure, he wanted to see Elena wake up.

It was only then, as the chance that Elena’s body might live suddenly shot upward, that Stefan began to worry about other things. Like exactly what was going to happen when Elena did awaken. Like what the monster who had killed could do to save her in the future.

Actually, in his soul, he already knew the answers.

* * *

Elena had been so happy. She was still happy, although her connection to Stefan had changed, diminished. It didn’t matter. She could remember everything that had happened after Stefan had enfolded her in his arms as if it were happening to her now.

In only moments, she had been in that hazy, euphoric state where it seemed as if Stefan’s soul and hers were melting together. She had kissed him passionately and then arched her head to bare her throat.

But now it wasn’t about passion, Elena was thinking, knowing that Stefan could hear her

thoughts and rejoicing in self-revelation. Good chemistry—the sea-storm and violet sparks of mad attraction—was only a part of it. The other part was the timeless, unquestioning knowledge that Stefan was hers and she was his, and that this had ever been so since the first light had broken through the darkness of the universe, and that it would still be so when the last light in the universe quietly faded.

When the last evensong was played by the last of the star-winds, Stefan would still be hers, and would still be himself. A shelter to her, a home to return to; a gentle and strong and nurturing demon lover.

Words weren't enough to convey what she felt for her eternal beloved. Kisses weren't enough. Even bodies wouldn't be enough, Elena suspected, although they had not yet made this experiment. There was only one way to share herself completely with Stefan, and that was the blood.

Stefan, as always, had been initially reluctant to take more than a token sip of blood. Elena's tender-hearted vampire didn't want to again begin the cycle that would end with them trying to keep Elena balanced precariously on the knife's edge between life and undeath.

Could Stefan justify doing that for a few minutes of pleasure?

A few minutes of pleasure? Or to seal our souls' immortal bond? Elena sent to him telepathically, managing to put a world of irony into the thought. It was so much easier to communicate this way than with clumsy lips. She added, *Come on, Stefan, let's not be hypocrites.*

Stefan was not a hypocrite. He seemed to hesitate another instant and then Elena felt more blood being drawn through the two delicate puncture wounds in her throat. She felt her entire soul go with it.

This was the place where she and Stefan ceased to become separate beings, where they melted together—and where Elena experienced the wildest and sweetest delight. It was as if she had come upon a part of herself that she had forgotten, and that in reclaiming it, she was suddenly twice as much as she had been.

Warmth and welcome surrounded her, infused her. She seemed to be floating in a roseate

sunrise, with ravishingly beautiful colors all about. Palest peach and coral-reef and apricot blended with dazzling shades of corn yellow and old gold that heralded the sun. Amethyst and iris-ice showed where the blue of the new day's sky would be coming, while blush rose and pink lotus tinted the clouds.

This wasn't the rough magic of passion. It was the peace of heavenly adulation. It was the wonderful mystery of Stefan's love for her. And with it came the stunning ability to explore the world through another individual's senses.

I'm floating very high . . . for very long, Elena thought, dazzled. Stefan was so cautious when biting her that often she had only the barest glimpse of this glorious place in his heart. Usually she was forced to try to remember what the colors had looked like afterward, never quite able to put her finger on them. But now she could practically touch the wondrous hues.

It never occurred to her—or to Stefan, who was joined with her—that for her to hover at the peak of emotional bliss like this had to mean that Stefan was still drinking her blood. It never occurred to her that the higher they floated together, the longer they stayed, the less capable of rational thought both of them became.

That was how it had happened, then. Disaster had struck because Elena had been so happy for so long, and because Stefan had wanted her to be that happy always.

After a while things became foggy and muzzy. But that was rapture, too: surrendering herself completely to the drowsiness that shaded the world in plum and gentian, and even softly shimmering silver-gray. Bright shadows beckoned to her.

Elena sank down through the layers of color. Her eyes were shut now; she could sense the sparkling ebony into which she was descending directly on her skin. A voice from her own mind whispered to her: Sleep, for you have already chosen your path. Did you think you could float forever without sinking? Sleep now.

It was only then that Elena had realized that she was dying. The process had gone too far for

her to rise back up through the layers of color to find the world of life. But Stefan . . . Stefan couldn't die with her. That would be a tragedy. She gathered herself to make a momentous effort and managed to disengage his spirit from hers. He was healthy, she could tell, and why shouldn't he be? He had more than half her blood supply empowering him.

But he would be unhappy when he discovered what had happened to Elena. Elena had collected the last of her strength to send a message winging upward after him.

Stefan . . . this was my fault . . . not yours. Please . . . I'm not afraid . . .

That was the important thing. She wasn't afraid of anything anymore. She added her last wish.

Dream of me now and then . . .

And, whimsically, *Nothing is ever really forgotten . . .*

Then she was exhausted. But it was all right. She had done all she needed to do. It was time to rest.

During all the commotion afterward, she slept the deepest sleep of her life, unable to respond to Stefan's calls to her, unheeding of the tumult around her motionless body.

She was resting in the black satin peace of her own grave.

* * *

It was 2:00 A.M. before Stefan felt that Elena had stabilized enough for him to remove his life support and let her heart and lungs work on their own. They did work, sweetly and handsomely, closing his throat with gratitude. Elena was still receiving IV fluids and blood products.

Stefan felt new strength flood him at the knowledge that Elena's body was going to live, although now he was free to worry about what oxygen deprivation might have done to her diamond-bright mind.

Just be glad that Elena was fragile only in comparison to vampire-strength, he told himself. She had always bloomed with health, even in the most malodorous of environments; scarcely falling sick for even a day, and recovering quickly from injuries.

However, right now it was Stefan who had all her healthy blood inside him, while her veins were filled with the donations of strangers: strangers to whom Stefan suddenly felt the deepest gratitude. Their contributions had saved Elena's life, and it briefly crossed Stefan's mind that he might thank some regular blood donors in the future. After all, he was going to have a lot of time on his hands soon enough.

He had figured it all out while he stood by Elena's bedside, silently Influencing new doctors and nurses who hastened in and out of the room. As the hours passed, he had meticulously planned every detail of what had to happen next.

Now was the time to put his plan into action.

Of course, before the plan, he had conducted a trial in his own head. He had been judge and jury, and now he took his rightful place as executioner.

He would do what had to be done to keep Elena safe. Counterintuitive and drastic as the action might be, he had relentlessly followed the prosecutor's argument to the only possible conclusion.

His chance to put his scheme into motion came immediately. There was a lull in the activity around Elena; Stefan used Influence to make it longer. He leaned in and very gently touched Elena's temple, just above her oxygen mask, where blue veins showed beneath translucent skin. This process would have worked far better if he could have bitten her, but that, of course, was out of the question.

Stefan put the full Power of his stolen blood to work.

Elena was going to be the hardest of all the people he had to Influence deeply, he kept telling himself, as he encountered blocks and areas of obstinate resistance in her mind. Elena was naturally the most difficult because with her he had to do so much by hand, rather than simply using a seek-and-destroy memory neuro-virus.

By hand it was a little like doing surgery with a steak knife, unfolding the layers of Elena's mind and examining them closely and cutting necessary bits out. Now and then Stefan came across something that seared his soul, and those things he made sure to destroy so thoroughly that even

adjacent areas were obliterated.

For instance, a memory of a conversation about himself in the horrible prison in the Dark Dimension. He had been close to death for lack of feeding. For three days when the ancient metal bucket of slaughtered bull blood had arrived at his cell as the least senior vampire prisoner, there had been nothing inside but rusty stains. He had sworn to himself that he would not behave like an animal, but on the third day he had fallen on the bucket like a starving tiger and had clawed at the rusty flakes and sucked them off his fingernails. He had no hope of survival to see a fourth day.

And then, from beyond all hope, Elena had come to him. She had been dreaming of him, and dreaming had somehow loosed the tether of her body to her spirit. Astral projection, or out of body experience, the scientists in their universities called it. Elena had come to him because she was starving, too—starving for the sight of him, for the feeling of their arms around each other.

Her choking horror at the sight of his cell and his own ragged, white-faced and filthy condition had nearly overwhelmed her, he knew. But, Elena—being Elena—had refused to be overwhelmed or to show pity that would wrest away the last scraps of dignity that he possessed. She had listened with childlike complicity to his lie about having a secret store of Black Magic wine, which helped a vampire when no blood was to be had. She had held him with insubstantial arms and kissed him with ethereal lips, while ghostly tears had rolled down her cheeks and fallen onto his face. She had wept because her spectral blood could do him no good.

Every tear was like a cup of cool water spilled onto his burning body. It had taken him long bewildered minutes to understand, but in the end he solved the mystery. The phantom tears of a pure maiden could cure all ills.

Her tears had saved his life.

And he had whispered, thinking with a fully sane mind for the first time in a week:

> "And when all wells are drawne dry,
> I'll drink a tear out of thine eye."

"Is that Shakespeare?" Elena had asked between soft sobs. She had allowed herself to give

in to the wrenching sorrow because it would help him.

"Richard Lovelace," he'd whispered. "He lived in the seventeenth century, and died alone and a pauper. He was the one who said, 'Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage.' "

Stefan had glanced with derisive humor at the iron bars of his own cell, which certainly made a cage for him, especially now that he was so feeble. When vampires were kept close to death they fell to the general supernatural weakness against iron.

Elena had understood. She always understood him, and she'd wept even harder. "I'm coming to get you out," she'd said. "Nothing will stop me from getting to you."

And Stefan had shaken his head, holding her insubstantial form so carefully, so precisely, as if she were brittle rather than untouchable. "It doesn't matter," he'd murmured. "Not now. You're with me already. Elena, if something happens to me before you do arrive in person—"

"Nothing will happen to you before that!" Elena had cried, showering him with tears.

"But if something does, remember. Always remember, my heart:

> 'If I have freedom in my love
> And in my soul am free,
> Angels alone, that soar above,
> Enjoy such liberty.'"

"Lovelace?" she had whispered.

"Yes. Written while he was in prison."

"When you're free, *you* can write poetry for *me*."

"I will write you books full of poetry—when I am free," Stefan had promised, knowing that he couldn't write even a simple sonnet properly. He was trying to keep Elena from realizing that he was going to die before she arrived—even given the boon of her tears.

But Elena had rescued him from the very brink of death. And she had never again referred to his promise, and he had never written her as much as a couplet.

* * *

Something round and wet fell on the back of Elena's hand, which Stefan was holding. He

looked down at his own tear without recognition.

I'm going to have to take Lovelace from her, he thought, his heart pounding in slow, sick beats. I'm going to have to remove the poet's name and works entirely from her mind, most carefully, most thoroughly. Not to mention taking away the concept of astral projection. Why does it matter so much, though? I've had to destroy so many cherished memories already.

Somehow, taking away the gift of Elena's tears was worse than anything else he could think of at the moment. That gave him the strength to do what he had to. He sat with narrowed eyes—dry eyes—and destroyed the end of every neuron chain in Elena's mind that led to the poet, or "iron bars" or the tears that she had shed while she was out of her body.

Just another brick in the wall between you and your damned demon lover, he thought to Elena, not swearing, but stating a fact about himself.

It took him over half an hour of delicate tinkering, but at last he was satisfied that Lovelace was gone, that the prison was gone, that astral projection was gone. Stefan continued on his search and destroy mission for another hour, while the neuro-virus worked side by side with him.

At last, he withdrew from Elena's brain and scanned it at ultra-high-speed. When he was done he nodded emotionlessly. Everything was stable. He'd accomplished his goal.

He had removed every trace of memory of Stefan Salvatore from Elena's mind. As far as she was concerned, he had never existed.

Now he could release the red-haired man he had Influenced in the ED and allow him to call Elena's Aunt Judith.

And now there were phone calls he himself had to make, to Elena's friends who deserved to know what was happening. He pulled out his mobile and in a tight voice said, "Bonnie: dorm."

* * *

Bonnie and Meredith arrived amazingly quickly. It was the first time Stefan had seen elegant Meredith walk into a building looking rumpled. She had clearly thrown on the jeans and violet top she had worn the day before and had only taken a few swipes at her dark, shoulder-length hair.

Moreover, there was a pallor beneath her perfect olive complexion and her dark gray eyes were wide with barely-controlled fear.

Bonnie, on the other hand, looked almost disturbingly neat. She was wearing an unwrinkled apple-green sweater that complemented her strawberry curls perfectly, and, Stefan remembered, had answered the phone after a single ring without sounding sleepy at all.

Bonnie might be a problem, Stefan realized.

Still, he kept to his plan and drew Meredith aside first. "I want to ask you something," he said softly as they moved away from Bonnie and Elena. "But we need complete privacy . . . in here." He nodded at a dark and empty room ICU room he'd noticed a few minutes ago.

"What's wrong? What's happened to her?" Meredith said in a low voice.

"I'll have to whisper," Stefan said, hating himself. He leaned forward as if to whisper in her ear, and at the same time gently took hold of her left shoulder and right upper arm.

Then, with a swift dart he bit her like a snake. Meredith automatically brought up her knee and simultaneously wrenched her arm free to throw him in a martial arts move. But as the first spurt of her blood hit the roof of his mouth Stefan was Influencing her, calming her, forcing her to relax. Physically strong as she was, she never stood a chance.

When she became still, Stefan set loose his neuro-virus in her head.

As the virus began its work, he moved cautiously around in Meredith's keen and organized mind, handling some of the more delicate erasures himself. For Meredith, Stefan Salvatore was melting into non-existence.

"Sit down on that chair," he commanded her softly. "and just keep quiet until I tell you to wake up by using your full name. If you understand, acknowledge by speaking your full name."

"Meredith Teresa Consolacion Maria Sulez."

"That's right. Stay here and wait."

When Stefan hastened back to Elena's room, Bonnie was huddled forlornly beside Elena, holding her hand. Elena was still deeply asleep, to Stefan's great relief, but Bonnie was shivering

and crying.

"Where's Meredith?" She looked at Stefan out of doe's eyes in a pathetically pale face. But she didn't stop there. She went straight on to, "Oh, my God, Stefan, all night I knew that something awful was going to happen. But who did this to Elena? It must have been a vampire, right? A werewolf would have killed her. I keep trying to catch her thoughts, but it's all just whirly darkness. Are *you* all right?" She reached out to touch him and Stefan shook his head, fending her off with a warning wave.

Touching would only increase Bonnie's telepathic ability. But she'd given him an idea with her *"Are you all right?"*

"I'm—still alive," he said, pulling color out of his face. "But I need to ask you a favor, Bonnie. Only you can help me with this."

"Anything," Bonnie said instantly, and Stefan's heart slammed against his ribs, tearing at his mask of careful disinterest. Bonnie's naiveté was so much harder to face than Meredith's sophistication.

Here she was, willing to do *anything* for a monster like him, without even asking what it was, or what the price might be.

"Has Elena woken at all?" he said, as if he didn't know.

"Not even for a second." Tears welled up in the doe eyes.

"Good," Stefan said absently. "I—I mean, that means we can leave her for a few minutes," he added quickly, cursing himself as Bonnie blinked at him. "I have to tell you something in private, and it's good that she's not awake yet. Please, Bonnie. You're the only one who can help me."

At that, Bonnie let go of Elena's hand. She was needed: she would help. She followed Stefan into the room where he had taken Meredith, as docile as any lamb to the abattoir.

It was very dark in the room, so Stefan hoped to get an instant's grace, but Bonnie rushed to the chair immediately. "Meredith! Are—are *you* all right? Stefan, what *happened*?"

"That's what I want to tell you," Stefan improvised. He allowed his voice to tremble as he

pulled her away from Meredith. "Now just let me *tell* you what it is. I have to whisper it—"

Vampire eyes are made to see clearly in what humans find pitch blackness. So Stefan saw everything that happened next: the way Bonnie turned to look at him, the expression on her face. She wasn't fooled for an instant by the *"Let me whisper in your ear"* line. Instead, she was utterly, unmercifully terrified. And Stefan, once he had his hands clamped on her small round shoulders, didn't even bother to keep up a pretense for her. He simply tilted up her chin and bit.

Bonnie's mind was far less organized than Meredith's, and Stefan could only hope the seek-and-destroy neuro-virus would be able to navigate through the chaos.

He spent a few minutes fine-tuning, then pulled out before he could drain too much blood from the fragile body in his arms.

Afterward, he did exactly what he'd done to Meredith, sealing Bonnie into coma-like sleep until he summoned her by name. He put her on the bed.

He glanced at his watch as soon as Bonnie was lying down. He really had to hurry now. Matt should already be here at the hospital, and Elena's Aunt Judith was due to arrive at any minute.

This time Stefan hastened past Elena's room and down into the ED lobby. There he found Matt with his fair hair all standing up like the feathers of a thrush, looking sleep-creased and dazed and sick.

"Stefan! This guy says that a blond girl was brought in here *hours* ago and that . . . He said she was—" Matt stopped to gulp.

So, Stefan thought, the rumor mill was already grinding out stories. It was lucky that Matt hadn't heard anything specific about blood loss yet.

"Come quick," he replied, matching Matt's tone of urgency, and took the elevator back up. "There's something I have to tell you before you see her, though. I have to tell you in private," he added.

"But just one word," Matt begged. "Just tell me if she's going to be—"

"She's going to be all right if you'll just listen to me," Stefan said, rapidly scanning the

corridor before the double ICU doors for any private spaces. He spotted what looked like a supply closet. It would have to do.

"Come in here," he said, and Matt followed. Once again, it struck Stefan to the heart to see how trusting this young man was—when all Stefan deserved was hatred and suspicion.

"What?" Matt whispered as soon as Stefan shut the door on the cramped space. "Do we have to dress like doctors or something? Get into scrubs?"

"No," Stefan said, his canines responding to the smell of Matt's blood. He realized, with a shock, that some part of him was eagerly anticipating biting another human. He already had such a heady mix of Power in his veins that it made him drunk.

"*How can I help Elena?"* Matt insisted. "What the *hell* is going—"

Stefan turned smoothly, seized him and Influenced him to be still even before he bit. He was tempted to take more than he needed from Matt, because the blood was rich in chemicals released by panic and haste. To a vampire, adrenaline was a delicious spice, a bit like paprika.

Stefan barely managed to wrestle himself to sanity before he drank too deeply, and dropped his virus into Matt's undefended mind. Then, not knowing what else to do with him, he ordered Matt to follow him and took him to the dark ICU room where Meredith and Bonnie were sleeping. He propped Matt up against a wall by the window and hastened back toward Elena, only to stop dead in consternation.

Elena's Aunt Judith was advancing on the central nurses' reception area. But she was accompanied by more than just her husband Robert.

She had brought a very wide-eyed five-year-old Margaret, too. Probably no time to get a babysitter, Stefan thought, eyeing Elena's little sister askance. The child had a strange ability—not witchcraft as he understood it—to see certain things that adults missed. Fortunately, he told himself with desperate optimism, Margaret also had a tendency to keep Elena's secrets to herself.

But the little girl wasn't the biggest problem, by far. There were two women behind her.

One was Dr. Alpert, who had been such a steady friend in the battle against the fox-spirits and their mind-poisoning creatures called malach, now forgotten by all ordinary townsfolk because the Celestial Court had reset the world so that the war hadn't happened.

The other woman, walking with a cane but briskly, was Stefan's one-time landlady: the shape-changing, erudite, and most-thoroughly-perceptive town witch, Mrs. Flowers. Why had Elena's aunt called her?

Wrong assumption, Stefan thought. Dr. Alpert had probably brought the old woman, who had probably been warned about what was going to happen and called Elena's physician looking for a lift.

But even this group was nothing compared to the presence that Stefan could sense arriving just above the hospital. Up there the weather had suddenly turned very nasty indeed for September, with thunder clashing like a war of the gods overhead, and freezing, foggy rain cutting the visibility down to a distance of three feet, all lit by greenish-purple clouds in flashes of many-tongued lightning. Stefan could sense it easily with his heightened Power.

Someone out there with a great deal of Power of their own was seriously unhappy, and Stefan recognized the unique signature of the one in the midst of the holocaust.

Damon had arrived.

Stefan had no idea of how to handle him. But handle him he must, and immediately, because Damon's mental voice was now crashing like a tsunami into Stefan's mind.

On the roof, little brother. And right this instant. I want to see you coming at a dead run.

* * *

Yes, as Damon had sat in the dimly-lit booth with Kenzy, he recognized the psychic screamer, and it was his own little redbird, Bonnie the brown-eyed enchantress, caught in a moment of unbearable trauma and funneling all her terror and distress into a tight psychic message addressed to him.

Someone was hurting Bonnie, he'd realized, perhaps even killing her. That meant someone was going to be exceedingly sorry exceedingly soon. Whoever it was would learn the meaning of pain in a hundred languages before they would be allowed to die. Damon had flashed his most gorgeous barracuda smile at nothing at all.

"Excuse me for just a bit, will you, sweetheart?"

He had extricated himself from the surprised Kenzy's embrace and slid out of the booth before she could say a word. "I need to dash off on an errand for maybe half an hour. Then I'll be back—or you'll know I'm not coming. Keep the booth warm for me just in case?"

But I won't be hungry when I get back, he thought, pocketing his hipflask—it would never do to let humans reverse engineer Black Magic—and walking with swift grace to the surly bartender. He dropped a crisp hundred dollar bill on the bar, said, "See that my friend gets everything she needs and nothing she doesn't want," and was out of the door before the man could gather his wits for a response.

Outside, Damon had sniffed the air: brisk and chilly, and getting colder by the minute in response to his mood. He didn't even glance at his beloved matte black Ferrari 458 Spider blending into the shadows at the back of the parking lot. Instead, he took a bearing on the direction of the psychic scream, and then promptly disappeared.

Where a compact young man with dark hair and eyes had been standing, a single, downy crow's feather fluttered. It glinted for an instant in rainbow iridescence before alighting, black as midnight, on the dirty sidewalk. By that time, however, the crow itself was high in the air, winging its way toward the town of Campbell, as storm clouds piled up suddenly in what had been a moonless but clear and starlit sky.

Damon-the-crow admired his clouds from underneath by lightning flashes: their shape; their menace; their unusual and inventive color scheme.

Meanwhile he was making his best speed toward Campbell using the Power he'd gained from Kenzy in the last few hours, and the Power he'd gained from Grace at supper, and the Power he'd gained from Arianna at lunch to boost his own considerable natural Power. He couldn't teleport; not even he had found a way to do that, but he could fly much faster than any ordinary bird, which often gave others the impression that he could travel instantaneously.

And right this minute he was dive-bombing a building where just a short while ago Bonnie had released her deafening shriek of terror. It seemed to be a hospital, he noted, and another surge of fury washed over him. He needed to be invited in to any building where humans lived and slept, and waiting around for an invitation did not appeal in the least.

In mid-dive however, he sensed something that overwhelmed his fury with a surge of baffled frustration. He was close enough to the hospital to get a range of energy signatures, but what he saw didn't make any sense. He could see every life-force in the building clearly, and Bonnie was in a room, lying down on a bed perfectly still. The only other readings he got in the room were from Meredith, Bonnie's roommate and childhood protector, and Mutt Honeycutt, a completely harmless human, whose surname Damon had at last been able to master because it was so much like a brand of ham.

Even weirder, when he tried to contact Bonnie psychically, he got an answer that would have fooled lesser telepaths into thinking they'd achieved a connection and everything was fine. Damon was too powerful and skeptical to be misled. He was accessing an answering machine. Bonnie's real brain was shut down, comatose, but a layer at the top had been added that reassured a shallow probe that she was fine, just fine, just very fine.

Then Damon caught other familiar life readings and his dive almost turned into a spin.

Elena! Elena was there, but her aura was so dim that he could hardly get a fix on it. Normally, it shone out warm and bright and all shades of gold, from antique to platinum, like the

silken web of her hair.

For an instant, horror and astonishment set Damon's rage on the back burner. Gods, he thought, stricken, what had *happened* last night? He didn't bother trying to contact Elena psychically; she was too weak even to sustain an answering-machine proxy.

And then—finally—Damon noticed the aura he should have seen first. He had been so focused on Bonnie and her surroundings, and then he'd spread out his probe over just a little more physical space . . . but still, he rebuked himself, that was no excuse. Any ordinary visitor would have seen in the hospital one aura that overshadowed all the others, one so strong that Damon had to zoom his out perception several times so that he could view all of it.

That was when he found that except for the sheer dimensions of the swollen aura, it was familiar to him. Too familiar, as a matter of fact. He'd known it all his life. It belonged to his younger brother, Stefan.

Instantly, rage washed over Damon again. There was only one way that Stefan's aura could have gotten the way it was, and it explained why Elena's life-force was so dim, and why Bonnie had sent that telepathic scream toward Damon.

Damon landed, changed into human form and sent his demand on a tight beam directly to Stefan, making no attempt to hide his feelings of contempt and white-hot fury. *On the roof, little brother. And right this instant.*

It never occurred to him for a moment to be afraid. The tremendous aura didn't threaten him, it challenged.

It excited.

And just this minute it was moving toward him, as Stefan himself walked—rapidly and sinuously—out of a door on the roof.

"What in Hell happened?" Damon shouted at him. "What *happened* here?"

Stefan regarded him with eerily calm green eyes and spoke with no particular emphasis. "I killed Elena. I mean—a little—she might have been technically dead for an instant. She came right

back. But I did it, yes. Basically, I exsanguinated her."

Damon was taking in every aspect of Stefan's behavior. Stefan was obviously and entirely insane. Damon pulled in his raging aura and took a couple of deep breaths. You had to step carefully around madmen in a conversation. Damon knew that because he'd so often been the madman himself. Insanity didn't frighten him, but he had a healthy respect for it, especially when it was backed up by as much Power as Stefan had right now.

"And—Bonnie?" he said very softly, having an instant's strange trouble getting the name out.. "You killed her—a little—too?"

"I didn't hurt Bonnie."

Suddenly Damon was a lot closer to Stefan than he had been and he was shouting; he had grabbed a fistful of Stefan's shirt at the neck and he was twisting it, forcing Stefan up on his toes.

"Don't you dare lie to me, you damned puerile little worm! I heard her scream! I felt her terror before she blacked out!"

Stefan did—something—and suddenly he was out of Damon's grip and standing five feet away from him. His expression never changed and his strange green eyes never left Damon's as he absently smoothed out his shirt.

"Bonnie was frightened," he acknowledged. "But I didn't hurt her, not really. I held her to keep her still and I bit her so that I could Influence her more easily. But her life-force is perfectly normal. Look at her and you'll see."

Damon looked down into the hospital. It meant taking his eyes off Stefan's, but he had begun wondering if the stare-out was such a good idea, anyway. And something inside him was crouching in astonishment, muttering, Oh, yes, grab the crazy guy and yell at him. Brilliant survival policy. Where did you learn that, then? Suicide school?

Examining Bonnie, who was lying on a bed in a dim room, Damon could now sense her life force directly, and it was strong. He supposed he had really known this all along, but seeing her, feeling her heart beating steadily and her breath coming and going reassured him. The madman was

right. She was only sleeping deeply.

"Still, you bit her," he said coldly.

"I had to bite her," Stefan repeated. He was gazing at something very far away. "I had no choice."

Then he shut up and just went on gazing. Damon stared at his brother for a moment, and then worked his way back to the beginning of the conversation.

"But you told me that you bit Elena more than a little. You said you drained her."

Was it his imagination, or had Stefan just flinched slightly at the word "drained?"

Better be careful here, he thought. "Why," he asked quietly, did you do that? Did you two have some kind of fight?" Or, he thought cynically, safe behind a wall of very, very thick and complicated mental shielding, did you just finally realize how much Power you could get by taking that amount of human blood, especially blood from a teenager like Elena?

Stefan did the uncanny stare-out thing again. His green eyes were almost glowing.

"No," he said, "to both suggestions. It wasn't a fight and it wasn't for gaining Power. It was an accident. It was . . . love."

Suddenly Damon could taste the unpleasant copper of his own blood in his mouth. A whole host of vulgar words for what he wanted to say jostled for his attention, but he couldn't bring himself to apply any of them to Elena.

"You were . . . having sex with her," he said finally, with difficulty. White-hot anger seemed to hang just above his reach, but he was too tired to try to grasp it.

"No," Stefan said again. "We just—we hadn't been alone together since we moved into college. Fourteen days—no, fifteen, I think. We were just kissing."

Kissing? thought Damon. O-kay. All right, then. Dangerous kissing. "And then?" he prompted.

"And then I bit her. She wanted me to. I wanted to. And I wanted to do whatever she wanted."

"O-kay," Damon said, aloud this time. "And then?"

"And then we stayed up there too long, high up, in the light. In the sunrise. We were so happy."

"And then?" But Damon was beginning to have uncomfortable feelings of déjà vu. In the Dark Dimension, in the mansion of the Silver Nightingale, he had bitten Elena. He couldn't even remember if he had kissed her first. And he had drunk Elena's blood, thirstily, desperately, because he had been fighting back the pain of massive blood loss himself.

She had tried to pull back from him, he remembered, but he'd clung to her until she scarcely had the strength to move. Afterward, she'd fainted and needed transfusions—and that in a culture which was barely more advanced than medieval.

Who was he to judge Stefan?

But it still didn't make sense. He could understand that Stefan had fallen under the spell of bliss and taken far too much blood. What he couldn't understand was Bonnie, lying motionless in a dark room along with Meredith and Mutt, also as still as waxworks.

"After you realized that Elena was—a little dead—you drove her to the hospital," he coaxed Stefan.

"It was the fastest way, driving," Stefan agreed in a level voice. "But the police followed me. I had to Influence them, and then Influence the doctors here to give Elena a massive transfusion instead of cutting her open to find internal bleeding."

Ha. Yes, Damon thought. Elena must have posed quite a puzzle to the first doctors who saw her. Stefan was too smart to have left a mark on her, so it would have been *The Case of the Vanishing Blood.*

"You didn't bite the doctors, though, I presume."

The sarcasm went right over Stefan's head. "No, of course not. I had plenty of Power. I just put the right ideas in their minds and then I blurred myself in their memories and removed my name."

"But Bonnie. Why did you have to bite Bonnie? Did she come with you?"

"No," Stefan said, doing the eerie, ageless serenity thing that was beginning to drive Damon crazy. "I called our friends at Dalcrest when Elena was out of danger. I'd had plenty of time with Elena; I sat with her for hours during the transfusions. I found a way to make a sort of neurological virus. Well, I say a virus, but I mean a friendly one."

"To help Elena get her strength back, you mean," Damon hazarded.

"Oh, I was doing that all along," Stefan said.

Damon had a sense of having gone astray or missing something important.

"But you bit Bonnie and others—why?"

"To make them forget me."

*"*Forget what about you?*"*

"Everything about me. I bit them to gain more Power to Influence them and I put this seek-and-destroy virus in their minds. It erases all memories of me and puts in a little bit of blurriness around where the memory was. It should be as effective as when I worked it out bit by bit with Elena."

Without looking at all less weird Stefan suddenly looked very earnest. "I had to," he said. "I'm too dangerous for Elena—and if I left her friends' memories intact they would just try to remind her of me. She wouldn't believe them because all her memories of me are gone. Not just inaccessible, but completely gone, blasted away. Lots of tricky work there. But if they kept insisting on something that she knew wasn't true . . . well, I guess she might end up in an insane asylum." He cocked his head to one side.

Hairs were standing up on the nape of Damon's neck. It wasn't an experience he was used to and he suppressed the desire to back away slowly. This is Stefan, only Stefan, my little brother, he told himself. I know how to deal with him; I've dealt with him hundreds of times before. Usually just by beating him up, all right, yes, but I must have learned some other strategies sometime.

Unfortunately his brain seemed to be as blank as the ones that Stefan had meddled with tonight. *Reply hazy; ask again later.*

"Listen," he said, carefully keeping his voice low and devoid of inflection. "I'm sure you know—Elena must have told you—that I did the same thing to her five or six weeks ago. It seems much longer, but it was just the first time we went to the Dark Dimension. One night I took so much blood from her that she collapsed and had to be transfused. I did even worse than you did because there wasn't even a modern hospital to take her to—"

Damon noticed that his voice was rising. He reined himself in and found that he was holding up his hands like a negotiator entering a hostage situation.

"Anyway, Elena forgave me, and we put it behind us."

Stefan hadn't blinked throughout Damon's monologue, not once. Now, he did blink, once, as if deliberately. Then he glanced up.

Damon followed his gaze to see that all his beautiful thunderheads had dissipated somehow and that the stars were scintillating in the moonless black-satin sky.

When he quickly looked back at Stefan he found that Stefan was doing the stare-out again.

"You're right," Stefan said when eye-contact had been achieved once more. It took Damon several long seconds to realize that he wasn't commenting on the clouds or something in Damon's head but on Damon's story. "You did bite Elena and take so much blood that she needed a transfusion, and she did forgive you. But it was completely different from what I did tonight."

"Different *how?"*

"In two ways. First of all, you'd lost so much blood yourself that you were like a starving animal. You *weren't* yourself; you were in the bloodlust. That's something that happened by a freak accident and will never happen again. But Elena and I were just kissing, that's all. We can't be around each other and not kiss. And I wasn't a starving animal; I was myself. Elena makes you want to be the very best person you can be all the time—and I was. I loved her so much . . . it was *love* that did it. And that makes me far too dangerous for her to remember."

Damon opened his mouth; shut it again and tried to kick his brain into gear. *Reply hazy; reply hazy; reply hazy.*

Stefan didn't wait for him to comment. "Secondly, you didn't kill the one and only girl you love in all the worlds."

"Neither did you," Damon said automatically. "Or else we both did—a little. I put her into a sort of coma, and it sounds as if you did, too."

"That's not what I mean. I said the one and only girl in all the worlds."

Damon opened his mouth to snarl, *"And now you're going to judge how much I love Elena?"* when suddenly he stopped, frozen. He saw quite clearly the picture that Stefan was projecting of wide brown eyes in a heart-shaped face and tumbled strawberry curls, and he felt all the defensive fury of being trapped in the wrong.

Wait a minute—he was *always* in the wrong, as far as Stefan was concerned. All he needed to do was what he normally did. It took an effort but after a moment he flashed Stefan a blinding 500 kilowatt smile and then turned it off instantly.

"Granted," he said, "I may be guilty of loving too much. It's the way my delicate nature is constituted, I'm afraid." And he lightning-flashed the smile again, this time with eyes as hard as steel.

Stefan maintained his eerie calm. "Then you may be able to hold her gently enough," he said. He cocked his head the other way. "Not so tightly that she shatters into fragments, all sapphire and pomegranate and jonquil yellow."

Damon was about to respond ominously that any girl he held shattered into rainbow fragments whenever he wanted her to, when suddenly his brain caught up with his testosterone.

Wait a minute, *wait a minute, waitaminute*, it told him. Listen to what he's saying. He's saying that basically he's never met Elena now. That she's not had time to see him, to fall in love with him, to set her heart on him.

He's saying that *right now* Elena is up for grabs. And you've been trying to talk him out of it. Who's the craziest madman on this roof tonight?

A shiver raised the hairs at the back of his neck again, but this was a delicious shiver. He, Damon, could go to Elena as soon as modern medicine had healed her. His face could be the first

thing she saw when she woke. He could court her in any way he chose; he could ask her on bended knee if she would be his princess of darkness. And there would be no memory of Stefan to come between them when the air began to crackle with electricity. There would be no shadow to darken Elena's lapis lazuli eyes when she found she was responding to the wild call of his blood to hers.

Elena, heart-ravishing, star-scintillating Elena, would at last be entirely his.

Damon felt something like Stefan's preternatural calm settle over him. He knew he was smiling a faint and very dangerous smile.

"But what are you planning to do next, little brother?" he asked, his voice light and almost mocking.

"I'm going to finish what I started. I'm going to Influence Elena's family and the other two who came here with them." Stefan's eyes were touched with silver in the starlight.

Damon scanned the building below, seeing the life-signs of the five Stefan was talking about. "Ah. You're going to bite them, too, then. You know, despite what you say, you're getting the hang of things quite nicely—and only five centuries overdue."

Stefan's lip quirked, the only sign of emotion he'd shown so far. "I don't bite children, Damon—but of course you wouldn't know that."

Damon, who had never bitten a child in his life, narrowed his eyes and murmured, "You don't know what you've missed. You know how humans have those candy wax bottles with just a sweet sip of juice inside? You bite off the wax tops and drink: one, two, three!"

Stefan said expressionlessly, "Do remember to tell Elena about biting off children's lids: one, two, three! I'm sure there's something in it for you."

Yes, like a knee in the groin, Damon thought and flashed a genuine smile. Elena was as fierce at heart as he was—which made her perfect in his eyes.

Stefan was ignoring him while still looking at him; a rather handy trick that Damon couldn't help but admire. "The adults she brought are either so easy that I can Influence them from this roof or so difficult that . . . well, how would you feel about setting fang to Mrs. Flowers' throat?"

"The old biddy? Too tough for my taste."

"Mrs. Theophilia Flowers, who just weeks ago shed fifty years and saved Matt and Meredith and the entirety of Fell's Church. The real town witch, with hair the color of starlight falling down to her hips."

"Well, she's put fifty years on again," Damon pointed out pragmatically. "And every day of it shows. I'd leave her alone."

"I can't do that. I have to talk with her. And then I have to wake Matt and Bonnie and Meredith up."

"Whatever floats your boat." Actually, Damon thought that the latter was a good idea. The three waxwork figures standing, sitting, and lying down in the ICU room with the lights turned off were starting to weigh on his mind. More specifically, the one delicate figure lying utterly motionless on the bed was weighing on him. The other two could doubtless fend for themselves.

"And after you wake her—*them*?" he murmured.

"Then I've got to go back to Dalcrest College and clean up the physical evidence. Tangible things that Elena can't ever see again. Photos in her dorm room and on her computers. I've already reprogramed her phone. She doesn't have many photos of me anyway, and Bonnie and Meredith shouldn't have any."

"Yes, we shadow souls don't much like to have our images captured, do we?" Damon brooded. Then suddenly he was exclaiming and hearing Stefan exclaiming in chorus with him.

"Her diaries!"

"It's all right," Stefan added after a tense moment, eldritch tranquility settling over him again. "I know all the very secret places she very secretly hides them. I'll take out of her mind everything about them from the summer before her senior year in high school on. Then I'll plant a memory in her that she stopped keeping a diary after that. I can do it right now from right here."

"You'd better plant it deep," Damon advised, serious for once. "She scribbles absolutely everything in those silly books. If anything could trigger her memory—"

"Damon."—tightly. Stefan looked up, eyes dark beneath the fall of his hair. "*There are no memories left to trigger*. I told you that; you just never listen. I am saying that I physically blasted away each neuron in Elena's brain that connected to me. I eliminated a finite amount of her gray matter to do it."

Damon felt slightly queasy, but he made himself smile urbanely. "Then the diaries would only drive her insane—words in her own writing about loving someone she's never met. You say I'm mad often enough—but I'd prefer a princess of darkness who isn't one bat short of a belfry."

There was a pause. At last Stefan said, distantly, "Damon?"

"Yes?"

"You have absolutely no idea what that's supposed to mean, do you?"

"No," Damon admitted, unabashed. "Studying their little quirks of language really isn't Me," he added. "I'm more about puncturing them like orange juice cartons, except that fortunately they don't ever come with pulp."

"Well, you're going to have to learn—"

"What? Well, what?"

"You're going to have to learn the way they talk if you want to spend serious time with Elena."

It wasn't what Stefan had intended to say and they both knew it. But at the mention of Elena, Damon felt at a flush of pure greed that started in his jaws and spread outward. He decided to let whatever was bothering St. Stefan go, so that he himself could start getting along with Elena as soon as possible.

"All right—and what will you do after you clean out the dorm rooms?" he asked, at his most polite, gently urging Stefan on his way.

"After I take care of everything and everyone at Dalcrest—including taking my name out of the college mainframe—I'll move on to Fell's Church. You'll want to use my dorm room for at least a few days, so people see someone who looks vaguely like me moving out. I had a key made for

Elena; here it is."

"Why should I use your squalid little dorm room for even one day's sleep?"

"Because the ED staff and police think I came from there to Elena's room in Soto Hall. You'll have to say the same, or else Influence them to believe some different story—and make sure that there is no suspicion of a crime. You should know the story I told, anyway. I said that I went to Elena's room—where there won't be any evidence for themto find. I said that I was a little late, and that I found the door ajar and Elena lying on the floor unconscious. I knew that she needed a good hospital, so I drove her here as fast as I could, collecting some patrol cars on the way."

"All right, all right," said Damon, who had already decided that this basic story was too boring, and was now wondering what he could use to spice it up. Some werewolves, he thought, or maybe some pirates. He added absently, "While you're doing the dorm rooms, don't forget Caroline."

The truth was that Damon was secretly placing bets every day on how long it would take for Caroline to betray Elena and Elena's friends. Right now, after the Celestial Court had cleaned up Fell's Church and its inhabitants, they were on friendly terms, but Caroline had shown her true nature over and over before. Damon was just watching for the egg of animosity to be hatched by the setting hen of resentment—ha! And Stefan thought he couldn't do metaphors!—to reveal the baby chicken of doom.

"I was saying," Stefan said in patient tones, "that then I go and take care of everyone and everything in Fell's Church and the towns around it. A few teachers, a few students, a few parents who knew me."

"Don't forget Elena's desktop in her room back on Maple Street—or the secret opening in the floorboards in her closet."

"I will not forget anything or anyone."—flatly.

"And when *everything* is taken care of? Just what are you going to do when you've finished everything, everywhere?"

"I don't know," Stefan said, disturbingly enigmatic, his eyes utterly opaque. "Maybe I'll go back home—back to Florence, I mean. Or somewhere else in Europe. After all, it's been said that 'the world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.' "

"Yes, and it's also been said that 'all the world is a stage and . . . if you forget your lines . . . well, basically you're screwed.'" A pause, then: "No?"

"No, Damon."

"Oh, well. I don't suppose that the great journey ahead of you has made you see reason about drinking human blood instead of animal, has it? It does reflect on the family honor, you know."

"Don't goad me, brother. I couldn't help what happened tonight. But from now on I go back to animal blood. And to hell with the family honor—if it ever had any since you came of age."

Damon shrugged most eloquently. "Whatever. But, little brother . . ."

"What?"

"What do you intend to do about the promise you made to Elena to take care of me always?"

Thunderous silence.

Damon watched Stefan narrow-eyed. He himself had a sort of share in the promise as well, although he preferred not to acknowledge it. But there was no way to pretend that his given word meant nothing to him.

He wanted to see how Stefan was going to wriggle out of this quandary.

For just an instant he thought his brother was going to break the connection of their locked eyes. But the moment passed. Stefan's pupils, which had dilated, went back to normal size again.

"I'll be keeping that promise every moment of every day. Because I'm giving you into *her* care, brother, and you know that I am. And that will be better for you than my care at my very best."

Damon opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again. No words, however came out. He was suddenly *seriously* afraid that his younger brother was insane. If Stefan didn't really mean all he'd said tonight—if it was some kind of elaborate practical joke . . .

But Bonnie's terror hadn't been a joke. Stefan had done something to her, and her instincts

had warned her of how drastic that something was going to be.

Stefan was still watching him expressionlessly. "You don't believe me now. It doesn't matter."

"No?"

"No. Because I want to give me your solemn word about one thing. Only one. Will you hear me out?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really." Stefan spoke two more quiet sentences and then stood silent, waiting.

Damon watched him closely for a moment. Then he gave a fluid shrug. "Fine with me. You may not believe this, but—"

"Then I have your word on it?"

Damon sighed. "You have my word," he said shortly.

Stefan nodded. "You'll understand my choice one day. And you'll see what I mean about Elena's care."

I will, won't I? Damon thought a bit giddily. Soon it's going to be *me* letting Elena convince me to drink her blood, the way she always seduces Stefan into it. His canines throbbed at the very notion, sharpening. Since speaking now would only reveal this, he used telepathy.

All right, then. You've got a solution for everything. You've answered all my questions, so I suppose I have to let you go.

"As if you had any other choice—or inclination," Stefan said. "But I'm going to go, anyway. I'm going to Influence Elena's aunt and the others she's brought, and then release Matt and Meredith and Bonnie. And you're going to stay up here until your teeth are blunt again. It's best if you don't let anyone see you until I leave the hospital. I've already edited myself out of the staff's minds, but a second dark-haired predator made in Italy might blow all their circuits."

Right, right, Damon sent, already planning just where to go and what to do inside the hospital. *Goodbye*, he added, noting absently that he'd lost the stare-out by looking away while

thinking of Elena.

"Goodbye, Damon."

Good luck—no! Stefan! Wait!

Stefan, who had started for the door to the stairs leading down, paused and turned like a grownup looking back at a toddler who didn't want to go to bed.

"Wait, wait!" Damon said. He had no trouble keeping blunt teeth now. He had just gotten a glimpse of future insanity.

"Well? What?"

"I think—no, I'm sure—that *Bonnie* kept a diary for a while after Elena died in the crypt. It was a blank book with little flowers on it. Blue and yellow flowers on a navy background. She kept it until the night of the summer solstice and she wrote all sorts of things in it. But I have no idea where it is now."

Stefan stared impassively into a middle distance. "I'm going to have to go into Bonnie's mind again."

"No, damn it!"

"Yes, damn it! You *know* I have to. You knew I would have to when you told me to wait."

"You've already meddled with Bonnie enough. She's delicate. She's emotionally fragile."

"I need to find out where that book is and steal it. The only alternative is for *you* to do it, and I don't trust you to finish the job."

"Oh, yes? First, you blame me for—for caring too much about Bonnie, and now you don't trust me to make sure she doesn't find a book that would send her stark raving mad."

"Neatly put. Also true."

"And now you're going to bite her again, to terrify her in her sleep—"

"No," Stefan said. "I can give you *my* word on that."

"But still, you'll be—you'll . . ." Damon's voice trailed off. He stared at Stefan, who held his gaze steadily. "Oh, you bastard," Damon said at last. He wasn't sure whether there was more

condemnation or admiration in his voice. "You've already done it, haven't you? Just now, while we've been arguing the point."

Stefan reproduced Damon's fluid shrug. "I told you I could Influence the humans from up here. I didn't see any reason to wait."

"You *bastard*." Well, now, we *are* a handsome family, aren't we? Damon thought, watching Stefan closely. Especially when we're being deceptive and ruthless.

"She didn't even notice it. And now I know where that flowered diary should be—and, no, I'm not going to tell you. I'm going away forever now, Damon. You could at least acknowledge that."

"I'm acknowledging it. I'll see you around."

"No," Stefan said in his strangely uninflected way. "I don't think you will."

And that was how Stefan walked out of Damon's life. He was through the door that led to the stairway down from the roof before Damon could turn around to see him go.

Oh, well, Damon thought. I *will* see him around again, whatever he thinks. I suppose he gets earned some points for an original interpretation of all the mad scenes in *Hamlet* put together. Plus a bit of the Hatter's tea party.

* * *

Stefan hurried down the stairs. Talking with Damon had taken longer than he'd thought. It had given Elena's Aunt Judith and Robert time to quiz the nurses. Fortunately, there weren't many doctors around at 5:00 A.M. on a Sunday morning, and any who did interact with Elena seemed to be shooing the family out and concentrating on the patient, who was magically getting better and better, as they did nothing but pump liquids and blood components into her. Stefan gathered all this from a peek into Aunt Judith's mind.

All right, now for one big *abracadabra*, he thought. He certainly had enough Power; he could feel it thrilling down his spine and out to his fingertips. He gathered it all together and then let it loose in the ICU.

Motion stopped.

Everyone stood like statues, from the janitor who had been happily banging her trash collector into sleeping patients' rooms to the nurse filling out information about Elena's vital signs onto a clipboard, to Aunt Judith and company, temporarily banished to the waiting room, a bleak space with one working coffee pot and a TV eternally stuck on a home buyer's channel.

Stefan stepped into the crowd of statues. He dropped his neurological virus, which he had been improving all the time he spoke with Damon, into Aunt Judith's mind. He had added a slightly pleasant, fuzzy effect to the basic software, and in a moment Aunt Judith was wearing a bemused smile despite the streaks of tears on her face. Robert and Dr. Alpert joined her.

Then Stefan turned to the little girl who was sitting on a plastic chair holding a much-loved brown teddy bear in her arms. Her hair was the same sunlight color as Elena's, and so fine that it stood up a bit from static electricity. She was entranced, but very lightly. Stefan put gentle fingertips on her temple.

Margaret?

Yes? She clutched the bear more tightly to her chest. She shouldn't be able to do that, to move at all, but she did it anyway.

Do you remember me? Are you scared of me?

Yes, Margaret said flatly, obviously to both questions.

You don't have to be scared of me. I would never hurt you in any way.

I brought this bear for Elena. It's not my bear. It's hers.

Elena is going to be fine, honestly. But I'm sure the bear will make her feel even better. What's his name?

She's a her-bear!

Of course. I'm sorry. What is her name, please?

Missus Kissus. Margaret watched him closely for any sign of levity.

Stefan didn't even smile with his eyes. He didn't want to. A memory struck him ruthlessly:

Elena cuddled up under his chin, telling him how she gave her precious keepsake to a squalling eighteen-month-old, and how little Margaret—never Margie, never Meg—had stopped crying at once and had never started again.

I think that's a wonderful name, he told the child. *A precious gift from an even more precious sister. Now, Margaret* . . . He hesitated.

I want to see Elena.

I know you do. But first—is it all right if I just do something so that you won't ever accidentally tell anyone about me?

No.

Stefan sat back on his heels, startled.

I don't want a computer virus in my head, Margaret told him flatly. *I don't want to be sick.*

Oh . . . neither would I. But this isn't like being sick. It's to make you forget.

Forget what?

Forget me. And . . . I'm sorry, Margaret, but I have to do it, even if you don't want me to. Otherwise Elena may be the one to get sick . . . so sick that she has to go away.

Margaret seemed to be thinking. He gave her a long-drawn-out minute.

All right, she said when fifty-seven seconds had gone by. *If it's for Elena.*

It's for Elena, Stefan told her softly. *All for Elena. Goodbye, Margaret. I wish I could have watched you grow up.*

He expected her to be bewildered. *Goodbye, Stefan*, she whispered and two tears fell on Missus Kissus' worn fur. She watched him with wet eyes—with Elena's lapis lazuli eyes—as he slipped the neuro-virus into her mind. As it took effect, her feathery eyelashes swept down to lie on her cheeks. The last thing he heard her whispering was: "Elena, I'll take care of you now."

I just pray you won't have to, Stefan thought. He slowly got up, feeling old and creaky, only to see motion in a room full of statues.

"Mrs. Flowers."

She was sipping from a cup. "Hello, Stefan. Can I convince you to have a nice cup of raspberry tea with me?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Flowers. It takes a lot of Power to keep everyone still like this, so I haven't got much time to talk."

"That's a pity," Mrs. Flowers said. "I don't suppose this scrawny old neck has much to offer you, either."

Stefan blinked. "You want me to bite you?"

"Theophilia does. She's still inside me. Old humans never really feel old to themselves, you know; they just feel like youngsters trapped in aging bodies. But I'm old enough that Theo is a step removed."

"I'm sorry," Stefan said. "I could never bite you, or Theo, either. I will never bite another human again for any reason."

"Boldly spoken. Come and have one sip of Black Magic."

Stefan opened his mouth, but then wove his way through the motionless figures and slid into a plastic chair opposite Mrs. Flowers. She had a stainless steel hipflask set beside the steaming cup of tea on the coffee table before her. She nodded at the flask and smiled sadly at him.

Stefan examined the hipflask: unscrewed the top, smelled the liquid inside. Pure, strong Black Magic. He tried to figure out where she had gotten the wine, when he suddenly realized that he was parched—desperately thirsty—and he took two long swigs.

It braced him. He looked up into Mrs. Flowers' blue eyes, which usually were amiable but vague, and just now were more like two blue-hot stars. "And I don't suppose I can get you to reconsider this tragic course you've embarked upon," she said.

"No, you can't. I'm a danger to Elena—and that means I have to go away."

"You're going to need more human blood if you really mean to erase yourself from this world."

"No. I won't. I'll manage."

Mrs. Flowers just shook her head, her eyes sad. "Well, in any case, I give you my permission to hunt on my property, whether the prey goes on two legs or four, or flies."

"Thank you. And now I really should—" Stefan stopped halfway out of the chair. He sat down again. "Mrs. Flowers. Have you spoken to Ma*ma* or Grandmama about this?"

Mrs. Flowers' Ma*ma* and Grandmama had departed from this earthly realm in centuries past, but Mrs. Flowers still remained in contact with them. They could see the spiritual dominion, and were occasionally helpful.

The white-haired woman sighed. "Yes, Stefan, I have spoken to both dear Ma*ma*, and dear Grandmama, too. I'm afraid they're being a bit oracular today. Ma*ma* says—she was quite a fan of the playwright Christopher Marlowe; the one, I'm afraid, who wrote about . . . well, Mephistopheles, you know."

Stefan kept his face grave. "The Devil, in other words."

"*A* devil, at least, although I always think that people are more unpredictable than demons. A devil will always do the things he's done before. In any case, she quoted this famous bit that Mephistopheles said:

> 'Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.
> Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God,
> And tasted the eternal joys of Heaven,
> Am not tormented with ten thousand hells,
> In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss?'"

Stefan no longer had to force a grim expression. The words sank into his subconscious immediately. He said: "Do you know what that means?"

"Aside from the obvious? I'm afraid I haven't a clue, Stefan dear."

"I see. Thank you." Stefan found that he was unconsciously twisting the lapis lazuli ring he wore. He stopped himself immediately. No vampire could survive sunlight without a lapis talisman, and he had long ago learned not to do anything that might cause it to slip off.

"I'm very sorry," Mrs. Flowers said, "but Grandmama's communication is *quite* obscure.

She says this:

> ‘Now the hungry lion roars
> And the wolf behowls the moon,
> Whilst the heavy ploughman snores,
> All with weary task fordone . . .
>
> ‘If we shadows have offended,
> Think but this, and all is mended—
> That you have but slumbered here
> While these visions did appear . . .
>
> ‘Give me your hands if we be friends,
> And Robin shall restore amends.’”

“Isn’t that all from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*?” Stefan asked.

“Oh, yes. Dear Grandmama was a Shakespearean buff. But I’m sorry to say that she likes to pull sections together out of context or even skip bits. Still they’re all Puck’s lines, you know. Quite a character, that Robin Goodfellow.”

“Right.” With difficulty, Stefan dragged himself back to the real world. He was burning too much Power too fast. He could afford only one more minute with Mrs. Flowers.

“Thank you,” he said formally, standing and bowing over her hand, which he brought to his lips. Mrs. Flowers smiled like a Duchess. “Any last words for me?”

“Yes, my boy, and not oracular advice at all. Stop this plan right now, where you are. Don’t use your mind to make a hell of heaven. Go back to your friends, tell them everything. Tell Elena and ask for her help. Because you’re never going to be able to let go of her, nor she of you.”

Stefan didn’t mention the fact that Elena couldn’t by any means recognize him; that he had actually blasted away a not insignificant part of Elena’s brain in order to get all references to himself out of her memory. Not that it would leave her any less intelligent than before; just that there were many nodes in her mind that led only to dark spots in the gray matter now.

“Thank you,” he said to the white-haired woman. “Thank you for all your help in the past, and for all I know you will do for Elena in the future. I need to leave now. Goodbye, Theophilia Flowers. I never told you, but you always made me feel young.”

Tears suddenly wet Mrs. Flower's blue eyes. She stood. "Goodbye, Stefan. And good luck, my dear boy."

Stefan made himself turn around and walk away, threading once again between the motionless humans. He headed down the hall to Elena's room. There was a police officer just outside it, as frozen and unseeing as everyone else on this floor of the hospital.
Ignoring her, Stefan edged in so that he could see Elena.

Oh, beautiful! Elena's hair, all shades of gold, was fanned upon the crisp hospital sheet. Her face had color in it, not hectic red, but the translucent pale rose of apple blossoms. Her lips were parted. Her lashes lay heavy against her softly rounded cheeks.

But that wasn't what Stefan was praising. He loved Elena for too many reasons to be attracted merely to her physical form. Stefan was looking triumphantly at the bag that was now hooked up to the IV in Elena's left arm. The bag was full of rich, red packed cells—type A negative by the smell. They were giving Elena properly typed blood! That and her steady vital signs meant that she was not only going to survive; she was going to be superbly, splendidly well again.

No time, though—no time, no time. Stefan took Elena's right hand gently. He dipped into her mind again, erasing, rearranging, and creating memories so that she would think she had stopped keeping a diary back before her senior year in high school.

Sometime later, he found himself stroking her hand, and felt a spurt of panic. What if she woke up now? What if his Power burned out as Mrs. Flowers had predicted?

"I can't stay to say it properly," he told Elena, feeling wretched. He kissed her forehead, which was delightfully warm. "But you knew it all, anyway, before I took it from you. You loved me for the best of reasons. I loved you for the best of reasons. But what I told you nearly a year ago was the truth . . . I *am* a monster. I'm a devil. I can't even love without destroying." His voice cracked and he bent down one more time, to kiss her lips. When he felt no response from her at this, he knew that it was time to go. "I will always belong to you, Elena," he whispered. "To you and no one else. There *is* no one else. Goodbye."

He turned on his heel and left the ICU room.

In the darkness just a few rooms away the three motionless figures were exactly where he had left them: Bonnie lying on the bed, Meredith sitting in the chair and Matt propped against the wall. He took some information from each of them. He made some minor adjustments to their cell phones. Then he spoke.

"I want you each to count to thirty and then wake up and leave this room without remembering that you were ever inside it. I want you to think only about Elena. I say this to Bonnie May McCullough, Matthew Jeffrey Honeycutt, and Meredith Teresa Consolacion Maria Sulez."

He didn't wait to see if it worked. He knew it would. Instead he began to run.

He ran out into the corridor. Past the central ICU nurses' station, past the waiting room where Aunt Judith, Robert, Margaret and Dr. Alpert were beginning to stir. He ran through the great doors that opened on the ICU and down another corridor to the stairs beside the elevator. Six floors down and he was jogging through the emergency department. People were moving freely here; he had only frozen the ICU. He stopped, spotting the red-haired man who had interrogated him when Elena first arrived.

"I'm with Elena Gilbert—the girl who had the massive transfusion protocol," he said, sending out a coil of Influence. "I need her property right now."

A few moments later he was presented with Elena's clothing—cut off her, except the cap. He saw a gleam among the ribbons of fabric and caught up the black diamond and ruby locket.

"Thank you." He dumped the rest of the clothing back into the redhead's arms. Blurring his image right and left, he made his way to the entrance doors.

There were still several police officers outside, standing around their cruisers. Irritated, Stefan sent a great wave of Influence at them and was gratified in a moment to hear from one of the police: "Dispatch, this is Unit Five. Ten-twenty-four." Which Stefan's telepathy translated as "assignment completed."

He was afraid that someone might have confiscated the Porsche, but he found it parked neatly

in a space for hospital visitors. He puzzled a minute over this, and then discovered that the spare key he usually kept behind his license plate had been used. It wasn't a very brilliant place to hide a spare, but Stefan had placed wards around it so that anyone touching the little magnetic box got zapped with a sizable electric shock if they had evil intentions, while someone with good intentions—like Matt, say, wanting to borrow the car without having time to ask Stefan—felt nothing except a slight tickling.

As Stefan wheeled out of the parking lot, he heard Damon's voice in his head.

Hey, wait a minute, genius! Before I go downstairs, I have two questions for you. What about Alaric Saltzman—and Sage? What if either of them just appears—?

Stefan took a deep breath. *Then you'll have to deal with them yourself, brother*, he replied as expressionlessly as possible. *As you'll have to deal with Meredith if Alaric calls or texts her.*

He felt not the slightest guilt. Alaric was Meredith's fiancé and only a human—Damon could take care of him easily. As for Sage, that mysterious young man whose home was farther down than the Nether World; he was entirely Damon's acquaintance and entirely Damon's problem.

Right, right, just leave all the fine detail work to me, Damon grumbled. *You're the big picture guy.*

Stefan drove faster. He didn't want to imagine what his brother was going to see in a moment: all that wonderful hair fanned over the white hospital sheets like a halo.

Damon's voice interrupted his contemplations. *You know what, little brother? I can feel how much weaker you are already. You're going to need to feed soon, and-*

Stefan cut off the conversation without answering. No one needed to tell him that he'd been unforgivably profligate with the use of Power in the hospital. He was already feeling hunger pangs.

* * *

Damon jumped off the roof of the hospital.

He landed easily in a shadowy corner of the parking lot where Stefan's Porsche had recently been. He paused to sense his brother's presence move off in the direction of Dyer, of Dalcrest. He

shook his head, a brief, wild and almost beautiful smile touching his lips. Truly unfathomable. Elena was in trouble and her Stefan was running away from her.

But every cloud had a silver lining.

Suddenly, fiercely, Damon wanted to touch Elena; to hold her hands, to caress her hair. The desire was so strong that he deliberately decided to move slowly, to let the anticipation build. He moved into the artificial light in front of the emergency department and looked around leisurely.

No police anywhere. Inside, in the waiting room, sitting with their backs to Damon and watching a TV mounted on the wall, was a pair of young men, one with dark hair and one with auburn. The dark one bent over every so often to clutch his foot. Damon sent a tendril of Power into the waiting room and found out why.

. . . damn idiot to fall down the stairs . . . I didn't have that much to drink . . . and right in front of Mia, too . . . at least Ethan was decent about driving me here . . . it's good to know he's a real friend . . . I was such a damn idiot to fall down the stairs . . .

And *cut!* Damon thought, like a director making a film. He turned the tendril of Power to the other young man's mind and got:

So damn bored . . . I've seen this episode of Seinfeld twice before . . . I wonder what Jacob would think if he knew about me and Mia . . . if she hadn't insisted on me driving we'd be doing it right now . . . and instead I've got to babysit this geek . . . maybe she's cheating on me the way we're cheating on Jacob . . .

Aha, Damon thought. And we have found a winner. A true bastard. Let's see what's in store for him.

Ethan, he sent musically. *Oh, E-than . . . No, don't look around; I'm not right behind you. I'm standing outside. Come here to the big sliding doors. That's right. Don't worry about Jacob, he's busy with his foot . . . You can see me now, can't you, Ethan? . . . Time to say, "Please come inside . . ."*

"Please—please come inside," Ethan chanted mechanically. He looked dazed, unable to

take his eyes off Damon. Damon knew what he was seeing: a lithe and elegant young man dressed in black jeans and black jacket over a black shirt, with an air of esoteric power. The compact young man had black hair, straight and soft and fine, and eyes of endless and immeasurable darkness, unbroken by a single star.

The automatic doors to the emergency lobby slid open. Damon immediately stepped forward. Ethan stayed where he was, rooted to the ground. He was taller than Damon by half a head, which didn't earn him any merit points in Damon's personal register.

"And now," Damon said pleasantly, just loud enough for the suddenly-pale young man to hear him, "since you've helped me out, you're going to get your reward, see? Cos that's how it works. What will it be? Let's spin the mystical roulette wheel of fortune and find out, shall we, Ethan? And . . . you have won . . . *a punch in the nose!"*

His fist lashed out and made devastating contact with the middle of Ethan's face. The auburn-haired young man went over backward, both hands clamped over twin geysers of red that spurted between his fingers. He moaned, an animal sound.

"Oh, and by the way," Damon added, "Jacob knows all about you and Mia. I should be very careful not to make him angry from now on, got that?"

Ethan, eyes showing white all around, nodded fractionally, causing a ruby Old Faithful to erupt from his face again.

Damon left him. Kenzy had provided enough nibbles for the evening, but it always distressed him to see perfectly good rich red blood going to waste.

Since he had stepped inside, Damon had been holding himself blurred—almost invisible—to the hospital staff. It wasn't as flashy as keeping a whole roomful of humans immobile, as Stefan had, but just as useful. He paused by Jacob, who hadn't even noticed that his designated driver was gone.

Jacob, he said soundlessly. Jacob, an obvious fan of Orwell's Big Brother, jumped up and stared, horrified, into the television set.

Jacob, Damon repeated, *Mia is no good for you. Forget her and move on. Isn't there a*

nice but shy girl who always sits in some corner of Ethan's parties?

"What?" Jacob whispered to the TV. "You mean like—Abby?"

I mean exactly like Abby. Give Abby a try and you'll find a galaxy inside her. But drop Mia; she's two-timing you with Ethan.

With that, Damon strode across the waiting room and through the far doors, following Stefan's trail into the emergency department and then up to the sixth floor. There he dropped the blurring shield.

The elevator doors slid back and Damon stepped out. He was facing another waiting room . . . and a gaggle of humans, all either leaking tears or stoically grinding teeth. Damon recognized Elena's Aunt Judith and saw little Margaret rubbing her eyes.

And then, all at once, a thistledown-slender figure was coming rapidly at him, and a heart-shaped face surrounded with strawberry curls was turned up toward his.

"Oh, Damon, there you are!" Bonnie cried. "Did they have a lot of questions?"

Damon hesitated, realizing that he had no idea what she was talking about. He turned his telepathy reception higher, but Bonnie was already speaking again.

"The police," she clarified. Her large brown eyes were full of tears and light. "Were they mean to you? Did they think you had something to do with it all?"

Mean to me? thought Damon. Good gods.

Bonnie was looking as if she would burst into sobs if he didn't answer.

"Of course not," he said at last. "They weren't—um—mean in the least. I believe they've gone now." He had watched the cruisers glide away and disperse.

Damon was just about to go for a barracuda smile regarding the absent police officers, when a small explosion went off at the level of his chest and slim arms clutched at him desperately. He looked down, alarmed and surprised.

It was Bonnie who had exploded. She was keening. More, she had hold of him very, very tightly indeed. Damon tried to remember another time when she'd reacted this way but came up

blank.

He forgot about the barracuda smile. He realized that everyone in the room was moving—slowly but inevitably—toward him. It would have been disconcerting if it hadn't been for the timid, pained look on all their faces.

"What?" he said. He wished just fleetingly that he could say, *"Where the hell is Stefan?"* and then expect to get overemotional but reasonably thorough information from his brother, like in the old days of twenty minutes ago.

"What's happened?" he tried again. And then, in sheer panic: *"Elena—?"*

"No, no, son," said Robert Gilbert-Maxwell, Elena's uncle by marriage. He put a hand on Damon's shoulder.

Ye gods and little fishes, Damon thought, trying not to flinch as claustrophobia kicked in. They're going to surround me as if I were a spare queen bee and smother me! I'll be swarmed to death!

But Aunt Judith, leaving a trail of tissues in her wake, stopped in front of him without touching him. "Elena just keeps getting better and better," she said, and blew her nose. "It's like a miracle. The doctors can't figure it out at all!"

"Oh, good," Damon said. His ribs were beginning to hurt and he was sure he could feel his black silk shirt getting wet, but he couldn't seem to find a way to make Bonnie let go of him. "I think I'll go see her now—Elena, that is," he added to the room in general. He wanted to gauge reactions.

Sympathetic smiles everywhere. Margaret peeked out from behind a pair of legs with a face like a flower. But: "A new group of doctors has just gone in," said Dr. Alpert. "And they've promised to alert us if Elena regains consciousness."

"She's still unconscious?" Damon asked, not so much because he was surprised, but because it was clearly what everyone expected him to say.

"Yes, but her blood pressure has stabilized—at least that was their last report," Meredith said. She was standing disturbingly close to Damon, closer than he could ever remember her standing

before. But then she put her hands on Bonnie's shoulders and somehow accomplished what Damon had not been able to do. She got the sobbing girl to loosen her grip.

"Now, now," Damon heard her murmuring. "Everything is going to be all right. You shouldn't make Damon worry like that."

Damon frowned in the privacy of his own mind. There was something wrong with the way Meredith was treating Bonnie. Not condescendingly, not cruelly, but with a sort of lighthearted dismissal of Bonnie's emotional state that struck him as distinctly odd. After all, when a witch got that upset, she often dropped into spontaneous trance.

All Bonnie was saying, though, was: "I'm sorry . . . I'm an idiot . . . I'm just so sorry."

Better keep an eye on your little redbird, a snarky voice whispered in Damon's mind. *Maybe this crisis has sent her into some sort of ultimate meltdown*.

Maybe it's sent them all *into meltdown*, was all Damon could think to say back as Matt Honeycutt gave him a medium-heavy punch on the biceps. Usually Matt had better coordination and judgment of force—and a strike toward the jaw would be far more in character.

"You're holding up really well," Matt said, looking directly at Damon with eyes that were true blue, several shades lighter and less complex than Elena's. "Good job, bud. You're taking it unbelievably well."

Bud? *Bud?* I have fallen down the rabbit hole and taken all these human creatures with me, Damon thought, knowing he looked harried by now and not giving Tinker Bell's damn. Matt is *complimenting* me, he thought, and, I do believe, it's for not bursting into tears like Bonnie.

And I'm just standing here and letting them do as they like.

At that moment he saw the figure of sanity and it was shaped like a little white-haired lady drinking a cup of steaming herbal tea. Damon forged his way through the crowd to her and muttered, "What's going on?" He added nonverbally, *And please don't try to B.S. me because I have had that up to here.* He pointed at the large spot on his chest where the silk was still wet with Bonnie's tears.

"Why, Damon," Mrs. Flowers said in her most fluttery little-old-lady tones. "I'm sure I don't know a thing that's wrong, now that Elena is doing so well. Why don't you let me make you a nice cup of tea? It's raspberry—quite a lovely red, I think."

Damon lost it. He began to make a sweeping motion that would have ended by dashing the landlady's cup of tea to the floor. But partway through he had to alter his hand's course and absorb most of the kinetic energy into himself—ouch! He ended up smacking a fist into his open palm.

And it was all because someone with the voice of medical authority had just cried from across the room: "The doctors say she's awake!"

Damon whirled. The people in the waiting room parted before him like water-lilies before the prow of a rowboat. He walked straight up to the nurse who had just spoken and said, "I need to see her. I need to see Elena, *right now*."

No one contested his right to see Elena first, although Damon had forgotten to lace his words with heavy menace. The nurse didn't even look surprised; he just nodded and hefted a file in his right hand.

"That's good," he said. "We may be able to clear some things up with the doctors. Come with me."

Damon forced himself not to steal a backward glance at the roomful of people—most of whom ordinarily barely tolerated him—but he couldn't shut his ears to the soft calls of good wishes. He couldn't bother about the Waiting Room Weirdness any longer, though. All he could think of was how much he needed to see Elena. Somehow, when he was able to speak to Elena, everything would make sense.

He followed the nurse into the first lighted ICU room and found, to his displeasure, that it was crowded with people taller than he was. Doctors, he supposed. He forced his way through their ranks without apologizing until he could see the bed, which was adjusted so that Elena was half-lying and half-sitting-up.

Elena!

In that first moment, while she didn't notice him, he was able to swill down the sight of her: from cheeks that were only starting to regain their color, to an unblemished neck that was softly rounded and creamy pale. Her dark blue eyes looked very large in her face and her magnificent hair was in tangled disarray. There were entirely too many gadgets hooked to her. But she was alert—she was speaking—she was . . .

. . . seeing him.

Elena's entire face lit up, blood rushing to her cheeks. Her eyes widened and her pupils sprang open. She made a small sound liked a choked sob of pure joy and a motion as if to get off the bed.

All the doctors, in chorus, told her sternly to lie back down. Elena gave them a rebellious sideways glance. Damon was still riveted to the spot where Elena had made eye-contact with him. He wished he could go back in time and have that moment again. He wished that he could live in it forever.

Elena, he thought. *My* Elena . . .

Up on the hospital roof, arguing with Stefan, he had somehow forgotten what they were arguing *about*. But now he remembered. It was about this girl, this ordinary human girl, who could somehow stop his heart. And it wasn't just her outward loveliness, although Damon had to admit that her beauty and her aura were what had first drawn him in. But if poor Jacob-with-the-broken-foot did find that shy girl with a galaxy inside her, he still wouldn't know what he was missing. Inside Elena Gilbert there were galaxies like grains of sand.

And right now Elena was smiling right at him, just for him, with a look of utter adoration which he had only ever seen directed at Stefan before. But . . . Stefan was gone now. And either Elena was incredibly fast on the rebound, or there was something . . . something he couldn't quite put his finger on. . . .

"Now, then," one of the doctors was saying to this radiant newly-blooming rose on the bed. "We already have a record here, but it would help if you could add to it. You were in your room,

waiting for your boyfriend to visit, is that right? And then something must have happened, because when your boyfriend arrived, he found you collapsed on the floor. Do you remember if you had any symptoms before you fell down? Do you even remember falling?"

"No, I don't," Elena said in the tones of someone tired of answering the same question. "All I remember is waiting and then . . ." She made an unconsciously graceful gesture. "Then there were bits of a strange dream and nothing else until I woke up here, just a minute ago."

"What sort of strange dream?" demanded a roundish middle-aged doctor with a ponytail. He looked like a hail-fellow-well-met sort, but he was far too nosy for Damon's taste.

"Why," Damon said, stepping closer to Elena, "should you have the right to ask about her dreams?"

"Because it might give us a clue, of course!" The round little man began to talk very fast. "You may not realize it, but this girl represents a medical conundrum. She somehow manages to lose more than two and a half liters of blood—and there's not a scratch on her! What's more, she has no signs of miscarriage or internal bleeding—although we really should check on that again—" He reached for the blanket that covered Elena only to find Damon abruptly in his way.

"I don't think," Damon said coldly, with just a hint of teeth, "that Elena wants to be examined at this particular time."

"All right, all right!" A tall graying doctor spoke up. "Can we just confirm how she got to the hospital, then? Nobody called nine-one-one." She looked at Elena. "How did you arrive?"

"She's told you just now," Damon said softly. "She does not remember."

"No, but—well, that is the one thing I do remember," Elena said, sounding apologetic. With everyone focusing on her she finished, with a look of pride, "I don't know how, but I *know*. My boyfriend brought me here."

"Your boyfriend who swears he found you lying on the floor of your room, clearly very ill," a fussy-looking doctor put in, running her finger along some sort of form.

"Yes, and if he says something is so, it's the truth. He wouldn't lie." Elena looked up at

Damon, devotion in her eyes. She took his hand in her cool fingers. "And here he is, still watching over me. My boyfriend of almost a year, Damon Salvatore."

* * *

An Easter Egg, Damon thought dizzily. Or at least part of his mind thought it: the other part was concentrating on the extremely pleasurable electrical connection that Elena's fingers twined with his seemed to have set off. That may have contributed to his dizziness, he had to admit.

An Easter Egg in a neurological virus. How odd. But that's Stefan all over.

All that acting Stefan had done on the roof, had been just that—acting—Damon realized now, feeling warm with resentment. Although Elena's thumb stroking the side of his hand may have contributed to the warmth. He couldn't deny it.

Still, all Stefan's posturing had been to get Damon to come to one conclusion, and that was: *Hot diggety, I'll get to make Elena my princess of darkness and there will be no Stefan to interfere.*

But that wasn't true, was it?

Because Stefan had planted *this* in Elena's mind—in *everyone's* minds—Damon realized, slowed down only slightly by the feeling that if Elena kept stroking his palm with her thumb the way she was doing, he might grab her and demonstrate to the doctors exactly how she had lost so much blood in the first place.

Yes, it explained everyone's solicitous behavior in the waiting room, Damon realized. It also explained why Elena was looking up at him with serene and irresistible joy, the gold streaks in her lapis lazuli eyes catching the light. And why she seemed willing to show him that she had a Ph.D. in palm-caressing,

Everybody thought . . . well, basically . . . that he was *Stefan*, just with a different name.

No. It was even worse than that. Everybody thought that he was Stefan-with-a-different-name and . . . oh, no—oh, yes . . . *that he was human.*

It was a bold conclusion to come to, but one that he felt was warranted. No one in the

waiting room had acted as if he might be responsible for Elena's illness—which Stefan *had* been responsible for. Matt and Meredith at least would have at least queried him directly, if they'd suspected such a thing. Instead it had been all *"You're holding up so well, Damon,"* and *"It's a miracle, Damon!"* No hint even that they even knew he had powers of healing that he could use to help Elena.

Even Bonnie . . . Bonnie had given no indication that she remembered calling for Damon, although his presence had comforted her greatly. As a matter of fact, *she* hadn't offered to help heal Elena or said she was conferring with old Mrs. Flowers about supplementary treatments.

Good grief, she doesn't remember she's a witch.

Stefan had brainwashed them all.

Damon needed to sit down. He Influenced the ponytailed doctor to get him a chair from another room. He sat and let Elena play with his hand. She was serenely confident that it wasn't possible for her to do anything less than exactly what he wanted. What Stefan would have wanted. What, if she didn't stop doing *right now*, was going to force him to grab her and jump with her out of a window, carrying her off to some dark and secret lair, there to educate her about supernatural entities called vampires—that she happened to have temporarily forgotten about.

Get a grip, Damon told himself in stern voice. You're supposed to be able to resist torture, aren't you? Besides, you're actually in the catbird seat now, aren't you? Sitting pretty.

My dear little brother is going to make me act like a human, though, something primæval inside him thought, gnashing its fangs.

You'll get used to it. At least you don't actually have to *be* one of the wretched creatures of the day this time. No eating except for show, no mandatory breathing. No humiliation in the eyes of your real peers—well, maybe a little bewilderment, but nothing you can't beat out of them. And, best of all, you just have to play the part for a few nights or however long it takes to seduce Elena and then clear everything up . . . with a simple, genuine smile.

There was something he had to know, though. He squeezed Elena's hand to keep himself from

spontaneously combusting, stood, and bent to kiss her forehead chastely. Her skin was warm against his lips; she was certainly back to her proper temperature. Damon looked into her great luminous lapis eyes, and said, "Excuse me for just a moment, princess, and I'll bring you a nice hot cup of tea."

When he stepped back he took in all the doctors with a glance, and encased them in a coil of Influence. *With each hour that passes you will become more convinced that Elena's mystery will never be deciphered,* he told them silently. *And meanwhile, you need to go back to your own departments. Now . . . leave!*

He didn't stay to hear his own words repeated in different tones and tenors. He walked with a measured stride back to the waiting room.

Where, of course, everyone was actually waiting. Eight pairs of eyes lifted to his as he returned; their expressions ranging from inscrutable (Mrs. Flowers) to quivering with tears on lashes (Bonnie). He had to say something.

"If you're expecting me to make a speech, I'm not," he said, adding a winsome expression to fool them into thinking he was being modest instead of indifferent. "You'd do a lot better to just go in and see Elena. She's doing very well. I just came out to get her a cup of hot tea."

Muted chaos broke out. Matt ran over to shadow box Damon, who was seriously not into the play. Bonnie let her tears overflow, clasping her hands together like a child at prayer, until Meredith grabbed her up in a hug. Aunt Judith and Robert sagged together in a shower of used tissues. Dr. Alpert hefted Margaret high into the air. Only Mrs. Flowers sat quite still at the coffee table in the back of the room.

Damon approached the old woman and spoke lightly. "May I collect on that nice cuppa, then, ma'am?"

"Of course—if Elena really wants it. It will do her a world of good."

Damon immediately determined that under no circumstances would he actually give the tea to Elena. But he kept an open, friendly look on his face as Mrs. Flowers fluttered a thermos out of her bag, and then fluttered it open and fluttered a stream of steaming red liquid into a Styrofoam cup.

Meanwhile Damon was chatting casually with Bonnie and Meredith, only resisting their attempts to draw him into a group hug. "The doctors were close to admitting that they simply couldn't explain what happened to Elena. Neither how she got sick, nor how she got better so fast after the transfusion."

"I just hope it never happens again," Meredith said, giving him one of those steady, trusting, gray-eyed looks she had always turned on Stefan. Fancy that: Meredith, talking to him like an equal!

"I hope it never happens again, too," Damon said with truthful emphasis. He turned to Bonnie, struck by a sudden whim. "You were the one so interested in druids and palm-reading last year, weren't you? Well, do you think anything . . . supernatural . . . could have done this to Elena? I mean"—he lowered his voice—"like some kind of . . . witchcraft or something?"

Bonnie stared at him a moment, wide-eyed. And for just an instant Damon began to panic: maybe Stefan had set them up with code words that would release them from all their conditioning. Maybe "witch" was one of those words. Maybe this entire scenario was Stefan's way of getting revenge.

Bonnie burst into laughter. She tapped Damon's forearm with her fan—no, it was her fingertips, but it really ought to have been a fan, held by a genuine old-fashioned Virginia belle—and her brown eyes danced in the light.

"Oh, you!" she said to Damon. "You know perfectly well there are no such things as witches! You'll be talking about werewolves and vampires next!"

Even Meredith cracked up at this. And Mrs. Flower's high, flutelike laughter sounded above all the rest.

* * *

Elena felt that the stream of doctors who came to goggle at her and ask rude questions would never end. She had begun to think of some rude standard answers when the flow finally abated. An authoritative ICU nurse told her to rest.

"But I don't feel like resting," Elena said to Meredith and Bonnie. She bounced slightly on

her hospital bed. "I feel like getting up and going to my afternoon classes."

"You," Bonnie informed her kindly, "are nuts."

"But I'm going to get behind in Algebra, and be even more confused than ever. And I need to do homework for Nonfiction and Memoir Writing. How can I do homework here?"

"Well, I'll miss Trig and Micro-Economics today," Meredith said, her lip quirking, "but I wouldn't be anywhere else for the world."

"Me either," Bonnie offered. "Even if Elena and I both flunk Algebra-for-Dummies."

Elena gave her two friends a loving look. "Come here, both of you," she said, holding out her free right hand, and pulling Meredith close to the bed. Meredith snagged Bonnie, who leaned in to touch Elena's other hand. The three girls formed a rough triangle.

"I don't know what happened to me last night," Elena said, "but I know I'd never have survived it without my friends. How can I thank you?"

"By getting well as soon as possible," Meredith said earnestly. Bonnie scrambled up over the railing onto the bed's flat lower half. She perched there, light as any elf, but she looked sober. "And by never making us go through what we did last night, right, Meredith?"

"I didn't get some strange disease just to annoy you," Elena said, laughing.

"*And*," Bonnie said her mood turning one-hundred-and-eighty degrees around, "by throwing us a gi*normous* 'I'm-well' party when you're all better again!"

"Bonnie!" scolded Meredith, but Elena was already giggling and saying "Of course! It's the least I can do for you after all your worry."

"We'll have the time of our lives—just in case we end up dead the next day," Bonnie said serenely. "Romantic theme, huh?"

"Oh, charming," Meredith said grimly. "Now can we drop it?" Her dark eyes were fixed on Bonnie's. Elena felt something heavy hanging in the air between them.

"What is it?" she said, and when neither girl answered, she said, "No, I mean, really; I want to know."

"It's nothing to fret about," Meredith said gently.

Bonnie climbed back off the bed, looking subdued again, and Elena realized that her cheer had been forced. "What?" she demanded. She knew that Meredith couldn't be compelled to answer any question she had decided was better left alone; the tall, olive-skinned girl with gray eyes was as stubborn as Elena—almost. Bonnie, on the other hand . . .

"Bonnie!" Elena said quickly, plaintively. "If you know something about me, about my health, that I don't know, it's only fair to tell me. Did you call Mary?" Bonnie's older sister Mary was a nurse.

Bonnie glanced at her sideways. Her brown eyes, already swollen, were filling with new tears.

"Yes, but the doctors here know better—and you're all right now. Anyone can see that."

"Maybe, but she told you something, didn't she? Is it a disease? Is this just the beginning of something awful?" Elena felt a chilly wind; they kept the ICU so *cold*. She could ring for the nurse and ask for another heated blanket, but she didn't want to be a bother, and anyway, she couldn't let Bonnie slip off the hook. "Please just tell me," she said, trying to sound well-balanced and ready to handle anything but hearing the quaver in her own voice. "I mean, I'm not dying or anything, right?" She forced a laugh.

"Yes, you are."

Shocked and frozen, Elena tried to make sense of the words that Bonnie had just spoken. She could still hear them in the echo chambers of her mind, but her body seemed far away and she could barely chart her emotional response.

She heard herself make a tiny, involuntary noise.

"Bonnie!" Meredith exploded. She and Elena both found themselves staring at the back of Bonnie's curly head. The room lights had been dimmed ever since the doctors had finished doing their rounds. The strawberry glow of Bonnie's hair had dimmed, too, and her small body seemed oddly stiff. She had retreated so she faced the corner of the room like a child being punished.

"Everyone in this room is going to die," she intoned. "But Elena will be the first."

"Bonnie! Turn around and apologize to Elena this instant!" Meredith cried. Elena wanted to say, "Don't tell her to turn around," but her vocal cords were paralyzed along with the rest of her.

Slowly, Bonnie turned, both small hands raised so that they were covering her face in a way that looked more playful than ashamed.

Elena felt a wave of irrational terror. It was all she could do not to scream.

Her mind was whirling like a dust-devil. *I don't want to see, I don't want to see. . . .*

"Bonnie," breathed Meredith, and for the first time Elena thought that she could detect a hint of fear in the way she spoke to their friend. Elena herself felt as if she had been plunged into a nightmare. She couldn't bear the way the moment was stretching out, she couldn't stand any more heightening of the tension. . . .

And then it was gone. Something darkened the doorway and Damon walked into the shrouded space.

"What's up?" he said, and then quickly, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Elena replied automatically, but her hand reached out toward him of its own volition. Damon took it, turned it, and planted a kiss in the palm.

Elena blushed and laughed a little, but she squeezed his fingers tightly and was comforted when he squeezed back. As long as Damon was close, she would be fine, she knew.

Damon released her and turned to Bonnie. "And what are we doing now? Is this Peek-a-boo?" As he spoke, he put his hands over Bonnie's and then gently pulled them away from her face.

"No—" began Meredith and Elena realized that she was still afraid. Elena herself had a breathless moment until she saw that Bonnie's features were all present and correct and that the only oddity was that Bonnie's eyes were shut.

"Now, then, little redbird," Damon said. "It's autumn and time to fly south where it's warm. But you need your eyes open to fly—I promise. One, and two, and three!" As he said the last word, he blew softly on Bonnie's eyelids. There was a quiver of lashes and then there was Bonnie staring

at them out of her soul-filled brown eyes.

"Well, that wasn't nice at all!" she said querulously.

"What wasn't nice?" Meredith demanded. "You just—"

Bonnie hadn't finished talking, "Saying 'turn around and cover your eyes and then you'll have a nice surprise,' and then turning off all the lights! You scared me!"

"*We* scared *you*?" Meredith began, but then she stopped and frowned. "Bonnie, what do you mean, saying 'turn around and cover your—' "

"And then blowing ice-cold air on my neck—how did you *do* that? Do they have dry ice in hospitals?" Bonnie was feeling the back of her neck and looking angry and frightened at once.

"Bonnie," Elena said. "It was Damon who blew on you—and he blew on your eyelids! And I'm sure it wasn't cold, except that this whole place is cold, right, Damon?"

For answer, Damon took her hand again and blew warm breath on her fingers, making her bite down on a giggle. Damon had a slight, mischievous smile on his face, and that made Elena laugh aloud. It even melted Meredith and made her chuckle. And when Damon raised his eyebrows at Meredith and cocked his head toward Bonnie, Meredith nodded. She would take care of Bonnie, just as she always did.

"Come on, kiddo," she said, "let's leave the lovebirds alone. We're going back—oh, Matt!"

She had almost walked into Matt who was entering the room with a cardboard rack full of large Starbucks coffee cups.

"*Please* tell me not house blend," Meredith added, looking over the array.

"Are you kidding? I'm no poisoner. I've got double cappuccinos and hot cocoas—depends on whether you want a jolt awake or a warm hug goodnight." He looked at Elena. "First choice goes to the patient."

"Oh, a hug, a hug," Elena said eagerly. "But only if it comes with a real hug, too," she added, and got a strong-armed squeeze from Matt while Meredith held the cups. She then accepted a hot, fragrant cup of cocoa, made just the way she liked it, with a touch of vanilla syrup.

"Nothing for me," Damon said. "I plan to hold hands with Elena if I can manage without hurting her and see if I can't sing her to sleep."

"Good idea," Bonnie said. She seemed to have forgotten her earlier grievance completely. "I'll take a cocoa, too, if that's okay. *And* a big hug." She almost disappeared in the fair-haired boy's arms.

"As for me, I crave caffeine," said Meredith. "I've got to read my English assignment from *Everything's an Argument*, and I'd like some java before I learn about jousting with words. Of course, I'll pay the price, as well."

Matt gave her a cup and collected a kiss on the cheek. "You sure, Damon?" he offered as he stopped in the doorway. "I've still got both kinds and I promise not to charge for either."

"Thanks—uh, Matt," Damon said. "But, here, I'll show you something if you won't tell the nurses." He pulled his sleek hipflask partially out of his jeans' pocket. "Here's *my* poison," he finished, flashing a smile around the room. "Just the ticket for holding hands—or anything else."

"I'll bet," Meredith said archly. "Well, keep in touch."

"Especially if anything changes." A serious note had crept into Matt's voice.

"You know it," Damon promised.

"Ohh . . ." Elena took a long drink from her cup when they were gone. "We didn't even get our velociraptor sisterhood hug, and now it's too late."

"Not if you want me to run and get them back here."

"No—oh, Damon, you're so good to me—but, no, no," Elena said. "Besides, it would have been a little bit weird, anyway. I have to tell you about what happened with Bonnie."

"No, you don't. I was right at the door, just behind the curtains. I heard everything and saw pretty much everything, too."

"She scared me half to death, saying that I was going to die."

"I know. Although, technically, I suppose she was right: everyone who was in the room is going to die . . . eventually."

"But she said I'd die first. And her voice when she said it—and the way she seemed to have heard someone talking to her, saying something completely different. It was just so *strange*—"

"Says the girl with the disappearing blood." Damon shook his head. "I think Bonnie was under incredible emotional stress last night, and that she probably didn't get any decent sleep. Add to that the fact that she's a skittish little filly—"

"Or a sweet little red bird?"

"Ah, you caught that, did you? Jealous?"

"Not until you tell me you prefer her."

"Oh, my lovely love. My angel with hair like sunlight, and the spirit of a questing tiger. My princess of—"

"Ha-hem," Robert half-coughed at the door of the ICU room.

Damon, who had been bending, slowly, toward Elena's lips, now quickly raised his head. He became the soul of courtesy.

"I'm so sorry; of course you and Elena's aunt want to speak to her. Maybe even to stay with her for a while? Here's a chair." He smiled at Elena's aunt, who—to Elena's amusement—put a hand up to smooth her hair.

"Margaret's fast asleep, and we're going to take her back home," she said. "We'd just like a moment alone with Elena." Damon stepped out of the room with a little half-wave at Elena.

Aunt Judith came over to kiss Elena's cheek. "The doctors need to keep you for a little while to finish your treatment and their tests—and to make sure you're really as healthy as you seem to be. I'll be back with pajamas and a toothbrush and so on in an hour or so."

Elena laughed. "Oh, no. You'll go home and get some sleep. Damon will get my things from my dorm room." She laughed again at Aunt Judith's expression, but said as gently as possible, "I'm keeping my promise to you—honestly. But Damon can find some sweats for me to wear. He knows his way around a dresser."

"But you still need—"

"No, I don't. I don't need anything, Aunt Judith, except a biiiig hug. Thank you. And one from Robert. And one from Margaret."

"Oh, I thought you were asleep," Aunt Judith said as the five-year-old went to stand by Elena's bed, looking like a little pajama-clad spirit with her hair shining like a torch. Robert lifted her up so she could hug Elena.

"They're still putting, um, medicines into me," Elena explained, looking at her left arm with the IV in it, and the bags of fluids hanging above.

"Medicine and blood," Margaret said. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were dewy with sleep. "Blood's important," she said solemnly, looking into Elena's eyes.

"Yes, blood is important," Elena said, taken aback. She wished adults would be more careful what they said in front of her baby sister.

"And hair's important, too," Margaret said, causing Elena to glance up at her quickly. Margaret produced a full-sized hairbrush from her Pegasus Unicorn backpack. Elena could see that she had books and her little kiddy computer inside.

"I didn't put that in!" Aunt Judith exclaimed, staring at the hairbrush.

"No, the tea lady gave it to me. She said it was for Elena. Elena, I brought Missus Kissus, too. Here."

"Oh, sweetie, that's so nice of you. But I want her to stay with you tonight, and every time you hug her I'll feel it. Okay?"

"Well . . . okay." Margaret looked relieved.

Aunt Judith was looking over her shoulder. "I do wish," she said nervously to Elena, "that Damon hadn't invited his old landlady to come here. Dr. Alpert is one thing, and makes sense given the situation, but that scatterbrained old woman—"

"Mrs. Flowers!" Elena cried in genuine pleasure. "Is she here? Why didn't anyone tell me? Please have her come in to say hello."

"All right," Aunt Judith said reluctantly, as she and Robert turned to leave. "If you're sure that's what you want."

In minutes Elena was receiving the genteel hug of the white-haired woman. "Thank you so much for coming. I wish I'd known earlier that you were waiting."

"Well, I got in a nice nap while everyone else was bustling around," Mrs. Flowers said. "I'm delighted that you've made such a spectacular recovery, my dear."

"I'm just . . . trying not to think about it, really," Elena said, wishing that the chilly ache in her arm where the IV went in would subside. "I don't see what the point is, since the doctors themselves

can't figure it out."

"That's a good idea, to just ignore it," Dr. Alpert said from behind Mrs. Flowers. "Don't worry over anything that you can help." She ran her fingers through short iron-gray hair before hugging Elena carefully. "Call me any time you like."

"I will," Elena promised, touched. She smiled at the two women: Mrs. Flowers, fragile and pink-cheeked; and Dr. Alpert, sturdy with skin the color of mocha. "Thank you both."

When they left, a nurse came in to take her vital signs. After which Damon appeared, just in time to see Elena regarding her cocoa dolefully. It was lukewarm.

"No problem," Damon said, taking the cup. "A quick nuke in the microwave and you'll never know the difference. I'll even skim the skin off it. You'll feel better after you drink it."

Damon was right, too. The cocoa warmed everything but the arm where the IV went in. Elena was doing her best to dissociate herself from the entire arm—to pretend it didn't belong to her—when Damon put his finger to his lips and then drew the hipflask out of his pocket.

"Trust me?" he whispered.

"Eternally."

"Then try a sip of this. Don't worry; it's not alcoholic. It tastes like grape juice."

It tasted a tiny bit like grape juice, a little bit like champagne, and a lot like something bubbly and sweet and delicious—and very familiar, although Elena couldn't put her finger on when she'd tasted it before.

"Feel better?" Damon gently touched the arm with the IV. Suddenly, amazingly, soothing warmth was permeating every inch of the limb.

"Oh, yes! *Much* better!"

"Good. Then I'm going to scoot up as close to the bed as I can get, and then maybe we can see if we can't get to sleep." Elena watched him take off his black jacket and hang it on a hook on the wall, feeling as if the sight ought to make her giggle. It must be what's in that flask, she thought woozily. How many times have I seen him take his jacket off? And when the answer "once" floated

into her mind from somewhere she gave up and laughed out loud.

"I'm amusing, eh?"

"You're just gorgeous. And I'm in a hospital and I could sing . . ."

"Better not; they'll try to analyze the Black Magic."

"The *which*?"

"What you just had a sip of."

"Oh. Of course." Black Magic was the perfect name for it. That was what it tasted like: magic. How exciting.

When Damon moved his chair up close to the hospital bed and leaned in so that they could intertwine fingers, she felt even more excited, but very sleepy, too.

"Won't the nurses get upset if they catch you sleeping here, though?"

"Nah," Damon said. "They'll see I'm just part of your ensemble."

Elena snorted. "Kiss," she murmured drowsily, and instead of saying "Kiss" back, Damon got up and kissed her lightly on the lips.

Lightning flash. Suddenly, Elena was thinking of something else besides sleeping. Her lips tingled promisingly.

"Sleep," Damon said then in a whisper and before Elena could think of a sensible rejoinder, she was thinking nonsense, and then she was dreaming.

* * *

Damon felt Elena's body go pliant, heard her breathing become softly regular, and then relaxed himself.

Thank badness he hadn't been obliged to ingest any of that coffee or cocoa—he had a strong stomach, and he could eat if necessary, but Black Magic was the only drink that vampires were really able to enjoy besides sweet, dynamic, crimson blood. Damon turned his head slightly to view the packed red cells that were going into Elena's IV along with the other products. He was glad he'd brought the Black Magic, but he was going to need to feed sometime today and it was best to get it

over with while none of Elena's friends and family were around. Nurses came in regularly to monitor Elena's vital signs. Damon decided that the next one with an interesting aura would suddenly become a donor.

Now, then: what else needed thinking about? Bonnie. Something fairly desperate was wrong with Bonnie. Damn it! Who was interfering with Damon's sweet-singing little redbird? An enemy, obviously, and one who knew how to take advantage of a power vacuum *fast*, so a spy or someone who employed spies.

Damon had to find the culprit, the person who had slipped into the area of the hospital and Influenced or otherwise affected Bonnie. And when he found them . . . ! A faint smile flickered across Damon's face, or at least something which involved baring his teeth.

He would make such an example of the bastard responsible that news of it would filter down to the gutters of the Dark Dimension. When he envisioned how young and slight and vulnerable Bonnie was just now and then mused on the pure evil of whoever had invaded her mind, he went hot and cold by turns, and phrases like "boiling in crude oil" skittered through his thoughts.

But Bonnie wasn't the only thing keeping him awake. Elena was, too. Elena! He was preternaturally aware of every inch of Elena's being. He was suffused in Elena's aura; his skin was tingling with exultation at her touch. He could feel the delicious warmth of the hand he held, sustaining him. Childishness? Bliss.

Elena loved him, and with none of the guilt or fear that she had felt when she had kissed him before this. None of the guilt, because Stefan was not constantly prowling at the back of her mind. None of the fear, because Stefan hadn't already set the stage by telling her how much of a villain Damon was.

Still, Damon would give a good deal to have a few choice words with Stefan right this minute. His little brother had set him up, plain and simple. He had said nothing about taking all memory of the supernatural away from Elena et al. He hadn't even mentioned that he was convincing them, every one, that vampires, witches, and werewolves were creatures of fantasy.

Bonnie was now no longer a witch in her own mind, and therefore couldn't raise her psychic defenses. Of course that might change, since Stefan couldn't take Bonnie's powers away from her. Meredith no longer realized that she had been secretly raised to be a hunter-slayer—and Damon would bet anything that Stefan had stolen her ironwood fighting stave from her room, along with anything else that might spark a memory.

He wondered about Caroline. He strongly doubted that Stefan would be so cruel as to take the knowledge that the girl was a werewolf away from her. If he had, the next time she began to sprout a pelt and tail, she would have screaming hysterics. More likely, he had convinced her that none of her acquaintances were supernatural—but had he crippled her ability to sense auras? Maybe. He'd been in a desperate mood.

Oh, what did it matter? Damon was going to be with Elena, and that was what was important. A whole host of "firsts" were ahead of him and Elena. They hadn't even had their first proper kiss. She would wear his promise ring, and some evening in the near future, when she was particularly brave and ready for the knowledge, he would explain to her just what he truly was.

Then he wouldn't need to keep pretending to be human. Once Elena knew, he could tell the others. They could make new memories of him as a vampire . . . not just as Stefan's wicked brother, but as whatever he chose to be.

Damon smiled faintly. Maybe I'll tell them that *I* have a wicked brother. That will mess things up nicely for St. Stefan.

Damon let his head rest on the hospital bed, which gave him a charming view of Elena's right ear and her streaming sunlight-colored hair. Ears, he decided, could be quite deliciously kicky.

Absentmindedly, Damon set wards around the room in all directions—above and below, as well as around—and then he added a tripwire for the arrival of the next nurse. Then he shut his eyes and gave himself over to appreciation of the beauty of Elena's complex and mysterious aura.

In minutes he was asleep.

* * *

Damon dreamed. He dreamed of being dead.

And he dreamed of all the little mistakes, the blunders he'd made, that had added up to the colossal error of getting him killed.

He dreamed that he and his little brother were taking Elena and Bonnie to the Nether World: the uncharted realm as far beneath the Dark Dimension as the Dark Dimension lay beneath the earth.

That had probably been the first mistake. Taking two humans—even humans with high psychic potential—to the Nether World was a bad idea; it demanded too much of fragile human minds and bodies.

After a nerve-shredding journey, they had reached their goal: the moon that was home to the largest magical star ball in the world.

Star balls were spherical containers. One the size of an orange could hold the Power of an Original vampire or demi-goddess/witch inside it. But, because they held such power, they also tended to be protected. Viciously, vigilantly protected.

And yet Damon had erred again: not communicating with his troops. He hadn't explained this clearly enough to the human girls. Stefan took the forces that would be ranged against them as a matter of course, but Damon ought to have drawn a map of the danger for Elena and Bonnie.

They had found the star ball. It was enormous, too big for Damon's arms to encircle, and shining with dazzling Power. It was lodged in the first fork of the Great Tree . . . the Tree whose canopy-like branches covered almost the entire surface of this small moon. Encircling the Tree's great trunk was a space where the ground was different from what they had been walking on.

And here came the really serious blunder. Damon should have, in no uncertain terms, told Elena and Bonnie to keep back from this strange soil. At this most crucial time, he'd failed to function as a leader: he hadn't given the single order necessary to protect his troops.

Instead, he and Stefan—half-blinded by the coruscating brilliance of the star ball—had begun automatically analyzing the desolate circle of sand: sending psychic probes against it, trying to evaluate what it was meant to do, and how the Tree intended to defend itself from any intruder that set

foot on it.

They only stopped as Bonnie had leaped on top of a thick root overlooking the soil.

Because Damon had brought Bonnie to this place, Bonnie was suddenly in deadly danger without knowing it.

Because Damon hadn't told her otherwise, all Bonnie saw was harmless sparkling sand—and a trunk to be climbed.

Because Damon hadn't simply ordered her to keep still, all Bonnie saw was a chance to get the star ball and save her town before time ran out.

And now, since no one was near enough to reach Bonnie and physically stop her, she launched herself off the root with a laughing wave.

Too late, Damon had cried, *No, you little fool!* Also too late was Elena's lightning-quick grab for Bonnie's ankle.

Damon had no time to think. He could only act—or else see laughing Bonnie killed in too many ways for him to review at the moment.

It was then that he counted his final, fatal error, which was still a source of utter bewilderment to him. Because without a moment's consideration he had leaped out onto the pale, sparkling circle and caught Bonnie's descending body before she could land. He had then flung her as hard as he could away from the Tree.

He'd gathered himself for a desperate leap outside the circle again, but instead he felt the descending branch knock him flat. It was moving much faster than he could, and it was sharp. Damon had felt it slam into his chest and punch through his ribs, breaking them, before it staked him neatly just to the left of his heart, and went on to smash through the ribs in the back of his body.

As if it were not satisfied with this, fibers of woody threads began to swarm along the lines of his circulatory system, faster and faster with every passing second. The tree was destroying his internal organs with its hair-thin creepers. It was headed for his brain.

It hurt. It . . . hurt . . . so . . .

Wait.

Like a drop of water falling on his face, something brought Damon's present consciousness into his dream.

Nurse alert.

* * *

Stefan was finishing with the dorm rooms. It was a good thing that he'd plucked the information as to where the fighting stave was from Meredith's head, because she'd hidden it quite cleverly, resting it on top of a curtain rod in the room she and Bonnie shared. From below, it was completely concealed by the little top-ruffle of the off-white curtains Bonnie's mother had given them to cover their blinds.

He was glad, too, that he'd double-checked Bonnie for memories of pictures taken. Bonnie had a secret cache of Damon photos on her laptop. Mostly they were taken when his back was turned, but few of them included Elena and a couple featured Stefan as well.

"Sorry, Bonnie," he said as he deleted them all, permanently, tearing apart the atoms which bound the photos and the links to them together. "But since he's a shocking flirt, I'm sure he'll keep on paying attention to you."

Meredith's laptop and desktop were clean. Stefan searched for Bonnie's flowered diary, but he couldn't find it and Bonnie herself hadn't known what had happened to it. Finally he was forced to give up simply because time was running out. Maybe the diary was in her parents' house back in Fell's Church.

He knocked on Caroline Forbes's door. It was several minutes between her call: "I'm coming," and the moment when the door opened.

"Stefan! But—Bonnie just called and said that Elena had woken up. What are you doing here?"

"Just gathering a few things for her," Stefan lied. He gently enfolded Caroline in coils of Influence, adding to her entranced mind the notion that that her body felt well and strong.

Caroline looked as if she had swallowed a watermelon. Her faded-bronze arms and legs were still thin, but hard with muscle, her face was very little changed, but her stomach was massively swollen. This made it even more absurd for her to have accused
Matt of being the father; impregnating her less than two months ago.

Oh, well, Stefan thought. The Celestial Council had fixed that so it never happened, either. Caroline was officially the cast-off girlfriend of the conspicuously absent Tyler Smallwood.

And sometime soon—no one quite knew how long it took werewolf babies to be born when the mother had been a human at the time of their conception—Caroline would have twins.

"Caroline," Stefan said, "do you know where Bonnie keeps her diary—a blank book with little flowers on it? She thought she'd brought it with her, but I can't find it."

"What? No." Caroline frowned as Stefan slipped by her—he'd been inside before when Meredith, Elena and Bonnie and Matt had decorated the room for Caroline as a surprise. "Why would Elena want Bonnie's diary? The purple one you're holding is her latest."

"I know," Stefan said. He gently lay another loop of Influence around Caroline, making her anxious to help him. "Can you tell me, please, if you or Bonnie or Meredith or Elena have photos of me anywhere?"

"Photos of *you*? What are you talking about?"

Stefan pulled the tendrils of Influence tighter, reflecting that it was harder to get some people to be helpful than others.

"Well—I know that Bonnie keeps some photos on her laptop that are supposed to be secret from Damon," Caroline admitted. "You might be in some of those—but only by accident. Everybody but Matt knows where little Bonnie's heart is."

"Don't try to play them off against each other," Stefan said in neutral tones and without bothering to explain. "Are there any other places where pictures of me might be? Or anything written about me—besides diaries?"

"No. I don't think so," Caroline said. She was regarding him with an odd expression. "Hey

—just before you came in, Bonnie called. She said Elena was doing fine, but that the reason she was so sick was that she'd lost a lot of *blood*. And she kept talking about how worried Damon was. She never even mentioned you. So . . ."

Her green eyes narrowed in suspicion. Stefan said "So . . . what?" He had some odd idea that he had to listen to her before he Influenced her to forget that there were such things as vampires. He waited, absently tinkering with the neuro-virus, already altered specifically for her to allow belief in werewolves.

"So . . . Damon did it, didn't he? He finally lost control and drank so much blood while they were messing around behind your back that she ended up in the hospital. And now nobody's talking to him—except Bonnie, of course. And you . . . you're going to dump her, aren't you? Elena, I mean." Caroline's face was set in lines of shock, but there was an unmistakable gleam of satisfaction in her eyes.

Shock swept like the chill of a morgue over Stefan. It was as if he'd asked a student how to get from Dyer to Fell's Church and been told to start digging. What seemed like an easy question if you had half an hour and a car—and the sense to know that the shortest distance between two points on a relatively flat surface was, for all practical purposes a straight line—became in Caroline's mind a labyrinth of dark fantasy and scandal.

And you really believe anyone thinks in nice clean lines? a Damon-like little voice in his mind asked him. Because—

news flash!—Damon and Elena did *exactly* what Caroline just suggested and Elena ended up spending a week or so in bed while you were locked up in prison in the Dark Dimension.

Right—while they were desperately trying to get me *out* of prison, Stefan's own mind answered back. But in any case, it wasn't Elena's fault. Caroline could just guess that Damon forced Elena, but she'd *rather* have it be Elena's fault. Why? Why do some girls gloat over the disgrace of their sisters; why do they want to tear down instead of build up?

Guess what? You can't afford the *luxury* of brooding over feminine behavior right now, the

little voice in his head said distinctly. Only Shakespearean actors get away with soliloquizing when their ass is on the line.

"Caroline." He was suddenly, excruciatingly aware of the complexities of the job he was going to have to do inside her mind to pare away everything else supernatural and leave *werewolf* intact. At the same time, he became conscious of the smell of her blood, which was sweeter and far more tantalizing than the musky perfume she was wearing.

Mrs. Flowers said it was going to happen, he thought, forcing himself to ignore the fact that Damon had also said so. And: yes, this girl is pregnant, but I don't intend to do anything that might affect her offspring. I won't be *giving* anything to her, only taking.

Only taking, he thought again sadly, and realized that he was somehow holding and stroking Caroline's hand.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "On the rebound? I know *all* about that, sweetie."

"I suppose you do, and I'm sorry, Caroline. But—I don't suppose you can tell me *why* you hate Bonnie and Meredith and Elena so much?" There, he thought. No soliloquy, just a quick question.

Except that Caroline's eyes were mocking. "Can I answer in essay format?"

"There's not enough time. Matt and I helped them get this room together for you. I mean, your parents bought most of the actual stuff, but we all worked on making it as nice—as homelike—as we could. They enjoyed doing it for you." He glanced around the room, which was bright and warm and softly cheerful; where he thought he could see signs of Elena's good taste, and Bonnie's tenderness, and Meredith's sensible use of every inch of available space. All Elena had done so far in her own room was place a couple of lamps.

"Well, that's why people do the charity thing, isn't it? So that they'll feel better inside. 'Oh, poor Caroline: got herself in trouble; she shouldn't even stand on a chair at this point; we'd better do something for her.' But you know what, Stefan? One on one, I'm dead certain that I could take any of them down, right now. So much for standing on chairs."

You know what, Caroline? Stefan thought. I'm dead certain that you could, too, especially since Meredith has forgotten her martial arts skills. He felt a sinking in his stomach. Had he left Elena and her human friends vulnerable at just the wrong time?

"There's just one problem," he said aloud. "You should know that Damon had to take *all three* of the girls under his protection." Stefan went on silently: *And Damon's word on subjects of that nature means something to him.*

"Then count me as number one in his fan club," Caroline said, not surprised by the telepathy. "A guy whose word actually means something to him—fancy that!"

"And one more thing. I'm taking those three—yes, and Matt as well—under *my* protection, too. And, Caroline?" Stefan gently pulled on the hand he held.

She herself put her other arm around him, embracing him. "What?"

"When I say that, I mean more by it than I ever have before. I'm afraid that Saint Stefan had to go away on a vacation, and he left a monster behind to clean up his messes." He bit her before she could say another word and in a moment was fiddling with her mind.

It wasn't a pleasant experience. Caroline's mind was a labyrinth that led to a fortress. Normally, Stefan would have worried about breaching the fortress but today he simply slipped in through a small crack he noticed in an unexpected dimension.

Inside the fortress was another intricate maze, full of ambushes and dead ends and dark crannies. Once again Stefan managed to slide into a locked citadel at the far end without doing much damage—and he found himself in the first labyrinth once more.

Stefan paused, aware that he was still drinking. He was thirsty, but there was no other reason he needed to be drawing her blood. He made himself stop.

I would have sworn, he thought, aware of every second that was passing, that Elena's mind would be the most complex.

But then, the little counterpoint voice murmured, Elena herself opened her mind up to you. All you did was ask. And it's hardly as if it was your first visit there.

*"*Caroline*?"* he asked aloud, using no Influence. "Will you open your mind, please? It's full of delicate things that I don't want to harm. I promise I won't hurt you or look at anything you don't want me to see, but I have to make you forget about me."

And you think that takes opening my whole mind? Caroline's voice replied mockingly. *You flatter yourself. But you could always try: this way.* A closed door in the wall around the labyrinth sudden glowed with light. Stefan opened the door and found—strewn about on the metaphorical floor—Caroline's pet hatreds and grudges. He was grateful to see that he was prominent among them, and he dropped his neuro-virus into his area directly. Then he pulled up the entire floor and began to peel layers like an onion.

He was surprised to find Matt's image on one of the layers. Apparently, Caroline had resented Elena's taking Matt as a boyfriend and then cheating on him with the handsome Jean-Claude while on summer vacation. It turned out that Jean-Claude was fictional, but by the time Caroline knew that Elena had already called it quits with Matt—and had seen Stefan. The lightning bolt had hit.

All this needs to go, Stefan realized, as he saw how bound-up it was with Caroline's anger at Matt's continued devotion to Elena; of the way everyone seemed to defect from Caroline to Elena, Stefan included. Stefan now realized that his casual choice of Caroline as a barrier against Elena in the beginning had been about the worst decision that he could possibly have made.

I didn't mean to do any harm. I just wanted to protect Elena from what I thought I was—what I turned out to be, he thought.

And then: Damon will keep her safe. He'll keep the world away from her. She's never died in *his* care.

He stripped out the last layer of Caroline's memories that pertained to vampires in general and to himself in particular. There. Now he had never bruised her ego; now she had never seen him defect to Elena.

Even a telepath wouldn't be able to unravel that, he thought, vaguely proud, although he was

strapped for time. The neuro-virus was still working away when he left Caroline—via her window—as a falcon and flew to the Porsche, which was parked legally on a street a mile from campus. Next stop: Fell's Church.

Damon had been right. Mrs. Flowers had, of course, been right. Stefan had drunk human blood tonight, because that was what was had been needed to finish the job.

But after Caroline, it was back to animal blood only, he reminded himself sternly. No question about that. At all.

* * *

The ICU nurse glided smoothly into Elena's room. She wasn't one of those trash-can bangers who didn't care if they woke the patient or not. She was healthy, honey-skinned, with an aura that Damon was perfectly willing to call beautiful. He let her chart Elena's vital signs and then slid into her mind while deepening Elena's sleep. The nurse's blood was fresh and tasted faintly of ginger. Damon went back to watching over Elena, absently rubbing his chest just to the left of his breastbone. There was no scar where the Tree on the Nether World's moon had impaled him. Vampire flesh healed too well for that. But Damon could still feel the shadow of the stake. He supposed he would always feel it, just as he would always dream of it.

Just as he would always wonder what exactly had been in his subconscious when he had chosen to trade his life for Bonnie's while Elena looked on.

Damon didn't spend a second wondering why he had dropped everything and come winging to the hospital when he'd heard Bonnie's eldritch scream. He knew exactly why he had done that and he knew that she knew. But it wasn't a thing to be spoken of. It came from the time when he had been dead.

* * *

They have to let me out sometime or other, Elena thought. After all, I'm good as new.

When she woke in the afternoon the day after being rushed into the emergency department, she was radiant with health. The doctors on their evening rounds, however, were polite but skeptical.

No one expected her to stay well. After they left, she spent hours visiting with Bonnie and Meredith and Matt, all of whom brought her flowers and stuffed animals and candy—none of which was strictly allowed in the ICU. Aunt Judith and Robert came, with Margaret, who was not, strictly, old enough to be allowed to visit.

But the nurses were strangely lenient about the rules—Elena thought perhaps it might be due to the large boxes of chocolates she shared with the ICU desk—and Margaret took home an armful of stuffed toys to mother.

Both Bonnie and Aunt Judith had brought Elena toiletries and fresh clothing which also weren't actually allowed in the ICU room, but which were stored under a small table with a machine on it where they wouldn't be in the way.

That evening Meredith also brought textbooks and assignments from sympathetic teachers who wanted Elena to keep up with her classes if she felt well enough. Bonnie brought photocopies of notes she'd sweet-talked out of Elena's classmates in Physics 101 and Nonfiction and Memoir Writing.

"Although I don't know why you couldn't take Biology 101 and English 101 like me," she said as she handed the papers over, "and then we could have passed or failed together. Especially instead of physics!"

"Oh, no, physics is interesting—if you can just get your head wrapped around it. It's all about relativity and faster than light travel and black holes and atoms . . ." Elena realized that she was flushed with excitement and leaning forward, so that the saline IV that was still attached to her left arm strained and throbbed. She quickly sat back again. "Anyway . . . ah, Damon knows all about it. He can teach me."

"He does?" Meredith said at the same time as Matt said, "He can?"

Damon smiled shyly while inwardly damning Stefan's soul to hell for talking Elena into taking such a ludicrous subject. "It's something we talk about when we're alone," he said, as confiding as a crocodile. "I hold her close and whisper in her ear that one teaspoon of a neutron star

would weigh the same as nine hundred of the Great Pyramids of Giza on earth. It sends chills down her spine."

"It sends chills down my spine, too," Meredith said. "And Einstein's relativity's even worse."

"Hey, I should have mentioned," Matt broke in. "I got you some notes from your classes, too, Damon. I didn't bring any textbooks because I couldn't get into your room, but here're the notes from your classes today."

Damon slowly took the proffered papers. What the hell do I say? he wondered frantically. If it had been Meredith or Bonnie, he could have smiled lazily into their eyes. But it wasn't, it was Mutt, no, damn it: Matt, Matt, Matt.

Act like Stefan, something inside him seemed to counsel, and without stopping to think further he slapped a humble expression on his face. "You really shouldn't have," he said. "I mean . . . *really* you shouldn't."

Getting the notes would have meant asking a favor of a couple of juniors, and that must have been difficult for Matt, who was only a freshman. "Really," Damon said for a third time.

Glances were exchanged between the three girls. *Knowing* glances, and for a moment Damon tensed. But then Bonnie said, her innocent brown eyes on the ceiling, "I think somebody doesn't *want* to do his homework," and all the humans laughed.

"What are you taking, anyway?" Meredith asked, just as Damon began to wonder. He had no idea, just as he had no idea why he'd allowed Stefan to sign him up as if he were going to attend classes. He must have been drunk, or mad, or thinking about girls. In other words, pretty much of in his normal state, so: classes, why?

"It's Latin and History of the Italian Renaissance," Matt supplied helpfully.

"Ah, yes. Of course." Damon tried on a knowing look himself. He'd been thrown out of three Universities in Italy before he became a vampire, and had had Latin beaten into him by a tutor since he was a child. "*Do, das, dat, damus, datis, dant, damon*. I give, you give, he gives, we give,

y'all give, they give, run away."

Elena smiled. "So 'Damon' means 'run away' in Latin?" She reached to smooth his hair, which ought to have annoyed him, but the large IV needle still in her left arm gave a twinge and her smile froze. Damon hastily took her hand and pushed the pain out of her mind. She blinked at him with fuzzy love.

"Damon means 'run away' in every language," he said softly. "Even in the original Greek, *δαμαω*, where it also means 'to tame.' But *princeps tenebrarum* has no need to worry about such things."

"What's that?" Bonnie asked instantly.

"It's—just a nickname." Hastily Damon Influenced four minds to forget the second word. I have to be more careful than that, he scolded himself. I can't just keep wiping their memories. And Elena may be my princess, but she's not my princess of darkness yet.

"In any case, thank you . . . Matt," he said, drawing on all his memories of human manners. His recollections indicated that it might be a good time for a manly handshake about now, but Matt wasn't exactly a man yet, so instead Damon clapped him heartily on the back. He'd seen some college-age kid do that once to another.

Matt nearly turned a somersault. "Um—no problem," he choked when Meredith had started him breathing again. "Glad to—help out."

And for the god's sake, remember that they breathe for their lives, Damon added to his internal memo. Not just to speak or to concentrate Power, but because they *die* otherwise.

In fact, it wouldn't do him any harm to start breathing right now, when he wasn't speaking. Just for practice. He took in a huge lungful of air, felt his Power sharpen, and let out the entire lungful in one go. It sounded like a heavy sigh.

"You're sad," Bonnie said. "Well, of course you are. Elena's sick."

"Elena is *not* sick!" cried Elena. "Elena's perfectly fine except that she's attached to a horrible metal needle and several stupid mechanical contrivances. "Bonnie: *look* at me! I mean, not

just me, but my—my—"

Damon watched as Elena struggled to find the word *aura*. Clearly, she knew what she meant, but the word itself was missing from her vocabulary and therefore the concept was missing, too. Clever, clever little brother, he thought.

Elena collapsed back against the bed. "I'm healthy," she said disconsolately, reaching for Damon's hand for comfort. "Tell them, darling."

"Elena is as healthy as fruit bat," Damon declared instantly, smiling.

Elena's classmates all looked doubtful.

"Actually," Meredith said slowly, "I think it's 'as healthy as a hog.' Or a horse. But neither of them sound very flattering. I suppose in Australia you could say 'healthy as a wombat.'"

"One of my aunts married an Ozzie," Matt said. "I know it's 'chuck a sickie' if you pretend to be sick when you're really fine."

"Well, then I'm sicking a chuckie," Elena said. "Except that it's not me; it's the doctors doing it. I shouldn't have to stay."

Meredith was still clearly traveling on her own track. "Or you could say 'healthy as a *vampire* bat . . . in a blood bank.'"

"Meredith!" Bonnie cried. "Ixnay on the udblay."

"Why?" Elena asked. "I don't mind blood. I was thinking of kissing some donors. I'm alive because of donors." She glanced at Damon, not for permission, but for backup.

"Ah," he said, feeling trapped. "Hm. I was just going to make them rich beyond their wildest dreams of avarice. Does it have to come with a kiss?"

There was a long pause.

"Damon," Bonnie said wistfully at last, "I brought Elena her toothbrush; will you buy me a Ferrari?"

"Bonnie!" Meredith and Matt got it out in chorus.

"It's all right," Elena said peaceably. "As long as she doesn't ask to be my sister-wife."

"Heh," Bonnie said. "And exactly what were we back in the dark . . . in the dark . . . I *mean*, when we were personal . . ."

In the Dark Dimension when you were my "personal assistants" because you wouldn't say "concubines" out loud, Damon thought, fascinated. You're all trying to swim back to memories that you don't have anymore. I suppose I should break this up before it gets too complicated.

"Look," he said, "let's just agree on what's really important, okay?"

"About wombats or polygamists?" Meredith said ironically.

"No, and not about bats or Ferraris, either," Bonnie cut in. "It's like I said, about Elena being sick. I know you don't want to hear it, Elena, but you *have* to stay here. What if they let you go and whatever happened happens again? What if Damon's not around next time? What if nobody is? I know it's not any fun for you in the hospital, but what if they let you out and next time this happens you *die*?" Tears were streaming down her cheeks. "They *have* to figure out how to prevent that."

This time the pause was longer, as well as being darker. Physically darker, Damon thought; the ICU lights had been turned down for the evening.

He glanced at Elena, who was looking back at him, clearly nonplussed. "I . . . what should I do?" she asked in a small voice.

A bolt of ice shot down Damon's spine. He opened his mouth but nothing came out.

Elena—without a plan? Asking what to *do*?

I'm Stefan to her, he thought; I'm in Stefan's place, right? Since when did she ever ask Stefan for advice?

But no, his mind argued back. You're not *just* Stefan to her. You had your own relationship as well. Granted, it mostly consisted of fighting and kissing, but there were times when you two simply worked together seamlessly.

I suppose there were a few times she did consult me, Damon thought, loath to admit how infrequent those times might have been. And given that I'm so much older than she is, maybe she was listening more carefully than I realized when I answered.

But he couldn't give her answers now.

"It's up to you, love. If you want out; we'll get you out of here. I can find bodyguards who won't bother you but who'll monitor you twenty-four hours a day. Or you can stay and let the doctors try to diagnose you." He watched her closely.

Elena shifted, clearly disquieted. "I suppose that I'll stay another day. Maybe they *will* figure out what happened to me."

"What you've got," Meredith corrected. "Which is probably Southern Belle disease. You know how it used to be thought ever so romantic if you passed out or were pale?"

"It seems more like a 'what happened' to me," Bonnie said.

Elena shot her a glance that stilled any fears Damon might have had for her intellect. "Is that was your sister told you?" she asked casually.

Bonnie, who seemed lost in thought, nodded and shrugged at the same time. "Yeah, well, she thought you might have been attacked and gone into a fugue state afterward—a psychogenic trance—and wandered to Damon's room, while the blood was all left somewhere else. But that didn't explain how there could not be a scratch on you, so she said that it sounded like a miscarriage and hemorrhage."

"I wasn't pregnant!" Elena exclaimed, at the same moment that Damon snapped, *"She wasn't pregnant!"*

The sharp noises brought Bonnie out of her daze. "You tricked me," she said to Elena, in grief rather than in anger. "But Mary said you might not even have known you were pregnant until you lost it—and then you could have gone into a fugue state and not remembered anything of what happened after."

"Look east," Elena demanded, sitting upright in bed with her lapis lazuli eyes narrowed. Confused, everyone but Damon looked in various wrong directions; Damon turned toward true east and concentrated on the readout of the machine he discovered there.

"Does anybody see three Wise Men coming this way on camels?" Elena challenged fiercely.

"Huh? Oh." "Uh—got it." "Yeah, okay. Okay." The humans all seemed to understand what Elena was talking about. Damon frowned and examined a trashcan below the machine with a Dunkin' Donuts box on it.

"She means, you know, from the Bible," Matt explained.

"Ah. *Ah*," Damon replied. "*La Sacra Bibbia*. The Gospel of Saint Matthew, regarding the Magi bearing gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the child of Mary, who conceived although she was a virgin."

"What is myrrh, anyway?" Bonnie asked, frowning, while Matt said, "Isn't this getting sort of sacrilegious?"

"It's a fragrant resin," Damon said to Bonnie, and added to Matt, in an offended tone, "I'm a good Catholic, and all Elena was trying to say was that she was a donut—I mean a *virgin*."

"I am not a donut, and I'm going to get one of those purity rings and maybe have a purity *party*," Elena said, and Damon was glad to hear the old note of command back in her voice.

"Any reason to party," Meredith said cheerfully, obviously trying to bring the temperature down.

"Right-o," said Damon. "Purity parties for the girls; all of them; why not?"

"Because the entire freshman class of guys would have to commit suicide?" Matt offered.

"Because it's nobody's business other than our own?" Meredith suggested.

"Because Elena is going to die first," Bonnie said softly from the corner.

She'd moved. While Damon's attention had been on Elena, she'd moved until she was tucked almost into the machines, with her hands over her face.

Hearing these words once again, seeing the way bright Bonnie seemed to dissolve into shadows, Damon fully realized why the others had been so frightened the first time when she'd prophesied from her darkling place.

Good, he thought with a savagery that surprised even himself. Something to fight tonight. At last.

Who are you? he sent coldly, silently, to Bonnie's shadowed form. *And don't give me any nonsense about being Bonnie McCullough. Your aura's cold as ice.*

I am . . . no body.

What the hell is that supposed to mean? And why are you using this child to communicate?

She is susceptible. Easily controlled. Harmless.

Uh-huh. You don't know the first thing about her, do you?

At this moment, she thinks you are holding her. She wishes you to kiss her.

Yes, hello, earth to Disembodied Intelligence: there are hundreds—thousands of other girls all wishing for the same thing. This particular one, however, is special. She is protected, by me. Do you know anything about me*, you infestation?*

*"*Damon," Elena said softly. "Would you let me talk to her? Maybe she'll respond to questions—"

"Not yet, please, princess," Damon said. "Just give me a minute here." He was running diagnostics on Bonnie's mind, trying to find the intruder. It was well hidden, some kind of cowardly parasite. Bonnie, who normally would have helped flush it out by using her own witch abilities, wasn't even aware that she *had* abilities and was thoroughly terrified, seeing only darkness and wondering what had happened to the lights.

Intuition, Damon thought to her, putting his hands on her shoulders. *Use your intuition, redbird! There's a bad thing inside of you, poisoning your words and frightening your friends. Help me find it. Lead me; I'll follow. Fly!*

To give her some incentive, he took her hands away from her face and kissed her. It was a soft, chaste kiss, but it wasn't short and it wasn't brotherly. Damon would have liked to have checked Elena's feelings about the kiss first, but he was concentrating too ferociously on Bonnie. He needed her assistance.

Ohhhhhh, Bonnie thought, too innocent and too overcome (as Damon had guessed) to change

the kiss from chaste to passionate. He was right about inspiring her, too. As soon as he lifted his head, Bonnie's entire mind came alive around his probe, waking up from the trance she had been in, shining in brilliant colors, illuminating everything but . . . over there! A cancerous gray structure that should not have been inside her brain at all was lurking in her left frontal lobe, just ahead of her motor cortex.

Broca's area, of course, the one that controls speech, Damon thought, and knew that his thought was communicated to Bonnie. He and she were too intimately entwined now for barriers between them to hold. He was also consummately furious at the being that had used this device to hijack Bonnie's voice.

Let's get it! Bonnie thought, exhilarated by the chase. She activated her motor cortex, throwing her arms around Damon's neck. The dark gray cancer scuttled, crablike, away from the neurons firing behind it—only to run directly into Damon's probe racing to meet it. Threatened, it reared and menaced the vulnerable tissue all around. Damon's anger peaked. He slammed a miniscule bit of Power directly into the cancer's middle. The crablike gray mass flickered once and disappeared completely.

Yes! Bonnie cried, jubilant. *You killed it!*

I killed it. A*nd you helped me kill it*.

He bent and kissed her once more, this time on the forehead. Another kiss on the lips might just build in Bonnie the incentive to get possessed again.

Did it say anything to you this time? Last time you said someone told you to 'turn around and cover your eyes.'

No . . . tonight I just . . . well, the lights went out and I guess I fell asleep.

And I *guess you were* put *to sleep,* Damon said. He then quickly Influenced Bonnie to forget all the telepathy and the scuttling crab-thing inside her brain. When he was done, he said, "All right, open your eyes. Feeling better?"

Bonnie nodded, her fair skin still a little flushed. Damon turned to get out of the corner—and

found himself face-to-face with Meredith and Matt. They were both staring.

"Damon—" Matt began.

"What were you *doing* to her?" Meredith finished.

Damon looked past them to where Elena was lying on her hospital bed, tethered by the IV tubing. She returned his glance with the faintest of smiles, her message clear. She trusted him.

"Ah . . . shock treatment," Damon said, thinking rapidly. "She's a—a very sensitive girl, and I had to give her a jolt to bring her around."

"Shock treatment?" Matt shook his head. "That's, like, electric, and they take you and put you in a room—"

"There's another kind." Damon's mind was racing over the annals of human history. "It's—I could have slapped her, all right? Like General Patton with that private in World War II. But I thought—"

"That those are the only two alternatives?" Meredith, in contrast to Matt, was perfectly composed, and also perfectly infuriated. "Girls are in sad shape when they have to be 'shocked' with sex or violence. Shame on you, and with Malala Yousafzai's memoir out and all!"

"She deserved the Nobel Peace Prize," Elena put in.

"Wait a minute!" Damon tried to gather his wits. He was as angry as Meredith, and he actually had a better reason. He had saved Bonnie from a rogue malach, if not worse. But he couldn't tell anyone the truth. They would simply think he was insane, or was trying to drive Bonnie insane. He was absolutely chock-full of virtue, and . . .

. . . and about to be slapped. Oh, no; oh, yes—and he couldn't even duck. Meredith might have forgotten she was a black belt four ways, but she would have a motor memory of how fast she was. If he were faster, he would have to be very strange indeed, and his strangeness factor was already building up dangerously.

Instead of evading he just went a bit with the slap.

"Ow."

"Hey!" Elena sat up fast. Now *she* looked furious. "Why did you *do* that?"

"I . . . don't know!" The words tumbled out of Meredith's mouth, as she stared at her own palm in disbelief. "I . . . actually, I was going to kiss him and then say, 'how do you like it when someone suddenly shocks you?' I wasn't going to *hit* him!"

"I—I didn't actually mind what he did," Bonnie put in with soft reproach. "I mean, it didn't feel that bad."

"You hit pretty hard by accident, Meredith," Matt added, examining Damon's face curiously. "Were you *trying* to draw blood?"

"I just told you that I didn't—"

"Hang on, everybody. I almost have this stupid thing out," Elena announced, still sounding absent-minded.

Bonnie shrieked. Meredith drew in her breath sharply. Damon looked up in horror from the blood that he'd wiped from his lip with his fingers. He saw that Elena, with her usual consummate courage, and with an unbelievably unusual lack of judgment, was on the verge of pulling her IV needle out of the crook of her elbow.

"I think one more yank—" she announced.

"More blood! Oh! No!" Bonnie gasped, and sank backwards so suddenly that Meredith and Matt were just barely able to steady her.

Damon, on the other hand, had reached Elena in time to capture both her wrists and hold her immobile. "*Princess, stop!* Why are you doing that?"

"I can't have people smacking you!"

"She didn't mean it! It was a cross-wired kiss!" Damon was tasting his own blood and wishing he could enjoy the irony of the situation. He had no doubt that somewhere, deep in Meredith's subconscious, there were a few neurons Stefan had missed, and that they must be smirking right now.

"Please leave your IV line alone," he finished earnestly, still holding Elena's wrists. Even

so, blood was already darkening the tape that held the large bore needle in place.

"I don't think I feel well," Bonnie was whispering. "I feel all tingly, like when I had those trances." She was clearly enjoying the idea of being a sensitive girl who had to be shocked with kisses.

Damon saw Matt and Meredith exchange a look, obviously able to read Bonnie's thoughts as easily as he could.

"Bonnie," Meredith said gently, "do you know what you say in these trances of yours?"

Bonnie looked defensive. "No. I guess it must be scary, since Damon had to wake me up."

"You told Elena that she was going to die. In fact, you said that we *all* were going to die."

Damon found the changes in Bonnie's expression heart-wrenching. At first she was angry and defensive. "I did not! I would—I would never say something like that!" Then, eyes wide, with tears glittering on her lashes, she was frightened. "Why would I say something so awful?" Finally, head down, she flung off Meredith and Matt to stand by Elena. "I'm sorry! I don't remember saying anything at all, but I'm sorry!"

Elena, as usual, couldn't help taking the side of the underdog, even if the underdog was predicting her untimely death. "Meredith," she said, "maybe we should just forget all about this shock treatment thing. I mean, Damon usually knows what he's talking about. She's stressed and she's sensitive and it's all my fault in the first place."

"It's not your fault," everyone else said, almost in synchrony. The tension broke as they laughed a little.

Meredith looked back and forth from Elena to Bonnie and at last nodded slowly, reaching out to put a firm hand on Damon's shoulder. "Okay, so we forget it," she said.

"Until the next time," Matt said under his breath.

"I heard that, Matt!" Elena flared up again. "And do you really think I'm the jealous type? Or is it *you* who're jealous—of Bonnie?"

"Now, now, kiddies," Damon said, almost dizzy with relief. He felt he'd just dodged a

wooden bullet. "We don't want to keep arguing, right? And I think Elena needs a nurse to get this thing back in place." Blood was seeping out of the sides of the bandage tape by now, and Elena's three human friends winced.

"You're right; we need to think of her first," Matt said. "Sorry, Elena."

Damon was feeling quite cheerful now, despite an uncontrollable urge to swallow. Everyone trusted him; they had no reason not to believe him. They'd known him for a year, and he was older than they were by . . . well, a couple of years, anyway.

"It's okay, Matt," Elena was saying. "I don't even care if I'm a medical mystery anymore, you know? Whatever happened is over with and it's damn well not going to happen again. It's time to put it *all* behind us."

By my fangs and God's blood! Damon thought fervently. Little brother put a lot of work into you, didn't he? And in any case you're not one to follow the pack. If everyone else is enthralled by the utter weirdness going on here, you're going to lock your mind and abjure it even if it means standing all alone. *Especially* if that's what it means.

But you're not alone, my sweetheart, my princess of the night. You've got your velociraptor sisters and the dormouse—door mat, Matt, sorry, sorry. And best of all, you've got wonderful, elegant, dangerous, fantastically clever *me!*

"I'll call a nurse," he said solemnly to the group. "You three go home. I know you've got—things to do." With his back to Elena he winked at them.

"You're right; we do," Bonnie said hastily.

As they were saying goodbye to Elena, Damon put an invisible ward against evil on Bonnie and Meredith, and Elena, too, while he was at it. The ward consisted of an eldritch sign set around each girl's neck that said in flashing red letters: "Private property of Damon Salvatore. Everyone else stay away or I'll rip your head off. Don't let *this* be *you*!" It was illustrated by a very detailed picture of a headless figure spouting crimson. There was also a sort of subtext that would reveal itself to all *male* intruders, in which the head was the second or third bit to be ripped off.

As they left, both Meredith and Matt said something on the order of "Thanks," to him, and Bonnie went up on her little tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek.

Twenty minutes later, when a nurse had reseated Elena's IV line and scolded her for touching it, Elena looked rebelliously after her retreating figure.

"I said I'd stay here for one more day and I will," she said. "But I can't help hating it. I hate this thing most of all."

"It hurts, doesn't it?" Damon said. He could feel the hurt; he was hooked into her mind at a constant low level. Wards and signs were all very well, but if anything alien even *touched* Elena he wanted to know it immediately. He was full of the blood of Mercy Havenwick's finest and he was in the mood for ripping bits off *something*.

Even as he thought this, he took Elena's free hand in his and kissed her palm. He began to slowly reduce the icy pain of the IV needle by absorbing it himself. In a few minutes, Elena's eyelids fluttered and closed.

"That's right," he said quietly, "you get some rest, princess."

"Well—maybe just a catnap. But I want something first."

"Of course." He bent down and kissed her lips as he had kissed Bonnie earlier. But Elena was expecting it and experienced enough to take the kiss to a more advanced level. In a few moments Damon was holding her close as best he could and the temperature in the room seemed to have skyrocketed.

Oh, gods, and I don't even know which parts of her I'm allowed to touch and which I'm not, Damon mourned, staggered by what one kiss could do to him. His canines were dying to be allowed to sharpen, and being thwarted only fixated his attention on them.

Why didn't I ask Stefan to tell me the *really* important stuff—

like how far they'd gone? he wondered, half frantic. I can't get it out of her mind, either, since he's wiped it all out along with who he was to her.

Finally, he settled for what he and Elena had done in the Dark Dimension and softly stroked

the ends of her hair, crushing its silken fineness in his fist, winding its fragrant length with his fingers. He made sure she could feel it, too, although she ought not to be able to.

And then she scared him half out of undeath.

She broke off an impassioned kiss—to breathe, Damon thought—and shifted in his arms.

She arched her head back and bared her throat.

Damon was glad that his beacon was perfectly visible to him. Elena had nearly triggered her own accidental introduction to vampires and their autonomic reflexes. He found himself trembling like a thoroughbred ready for the signal to leap out of the gates, hovering over the slim column of neck and seeing the blue lines beneath the taut, translucent skin. Sizzling sparks were running down his spine and his fangs had sprung free without consulting his brain. All he wanted was one delicate bite at the external jugular vein, just the tiniest of punctures, through which he could draw just the smallest of sips of Elena's young and vital blood, which his senses told him was redolent of musk, sweet vanilla and exotic resins mixed with rich Oriental spices . . .

And which had picked up Elena's own fragrances from running through her body, because more than half her current volume of blood was from other people!

The shock of this realization did him good. He was able to straighten up and then bury his face in the tumbled glory of her hair, breathing in the delicious scents of her without wanting to deprive her of what she needed most to live.

I'm afraid you missed something, little brother, he was able to think almost sanely as he forced his fangs to retract. Elena defines kissing as "what you do before someone sinks their teeth into you."

I do understand why you almost killed her, though,. She's learned how vampires work and she knows every button to push, even if she doesn't know she knows.

He lifted his head only to find that Elena was still arched, offering herself, innocent as a kitten in a lingerie drawer. He planted a few gentle kisses on the skin of her throat and then said, "Come back down here, angel," while carefully tipping her chin so that she could look at him.

Her eyes were closed. She was in some dream that their minds had blended: and that answered his fevered question. *That* was the deepest part of her that he could touch: her soul. And he wanted it as much as she did. He remembered how easy it had been while they were looking for Stefan in the Dark Dimension, and he knew that he could initiate telepathy with her right now, without even an exchange of blood . . .

But he was supposed to be *human*. It was enough to drive anyone mad, and it had done just that. He'd been thinking mad thoughts a minute ago. He'd considered taking blood *out* of Elena. It didn't matter if he'd wanted a single drop. She was in the thrice-damned hospital because Stefan had given in to her spell.

He wanted her as his princess of darkness, yes, but not right now. He needed to prepare her for the transition. He had to wait.

Damon hated waiting the way cats hate water.

Elena finally opened her eyes. She glanced at him and then glanced at the empty space on the hospital bed beside her.

"Don't even think about it," Damon warned grimly, hoping that she would override him, that she would seduce him again.

"You don't want to get in trouble with the nurses again," he added glumly.

Elena sighed. "Maybe I'll go ahead and try to really sleep, then." Damon knew that she hated waiting the way cats hate static electricity.

"But first I need . . . I need to . . ." Elena was in the thrall of her own special motor memory. Her tethered left hand held something invisible, while her right hand hovered over the invisibility with thumb tucked between first and middle fingers.

As if she were holding a phantom pen.

"My . . . my . . . book. No!" Elena was getting frustrated, but Stefan had clearly done a thorough job on this subject. He'd ablated even the word diary from her memory completely.

"Maybe do your homework?" Damon suggested quickly, and just when Elena was starting to

shake her head, he produced the notes for Nonfiction and Memoir Writing.

"Oh," Elena said. She frowned at the words at the top. "I guess I need to buy a . . ."

"A journal,"—smoothly.

"Yes, a journal. But this week's assignment is just to write a short memoir about something that happened over the summer." Her frown deepened. "It's so strange. I can't even remember very distinctly. I know we did all sorts of things, but every time I try to focus on one, it slips out of my mind."

Damon wasn't surprised. After all, what was she going to write? I was a ghost, and then a human returned from the afterlife, and then a goddess, and then a slave, and finally an angel of destruction, and then an ordinary girl again, and then, just to end the summer on a high note, I helped bring my boyfriend's brother—who's now my boyfriend—out of a death-coma.

He found himself chuckling. "Didn't you—we—go to Warm Springs just a few weeks ago?"

Elena laughed and kept laughing. She ignored the question. "I like it when you smile," she confided. "Especially when you're happy."

"One usually smiles because one is happy, doesn't one?"

"I don't know about one, but I know about you. And you smile for all sorts of reasons. You smile when you're challenged or when you get—oh, *moderately* angry. You smile when something hurts you. You smile when you're about to do something outrageous or when you're doing your daft act. But I like it best when you're happy—and I've hardly ever seen you so happy before."

Damon blinked. She might think I'm human, but she certainly doesn't think I'm Stefan, was all that he could come up with at first. She knows me—a little bit too well.

"How can you say I haven't been happy?" he said, his lips still curved. "With you at my side for a whole year long?"

Elena reached for him with her right hand. "Oh, yes. And you smile when you're flirting or just piling up the B.S."

"All right," Damon said, allowing himself to be reeled in to bend over her and speaking

lightly but with a touch of thoughtful consideration. "If I smile when I am moderately angry, what do I do when I'm properly furious?"

"Oh, then you *beam*."

He swooped down on her then. There was nothing else to do. She did know him too well, and he had no desire to change the state of her mind. He just needed an interruption.

A month or so ago, he would have said something—something outrageous, as she had pointed out—just to watch the blood leap and flame in her cheeks and to see what kind of riposte she would make. Now . . . well, he had no particular desire to outrage her. Not ten minutes ago she had offered him complete access to her soul. She was being meltingly tender as she had never been with him in her life. He understood that if he wanted to spar with her, he would have to find some subject beside Stefan on which they disagreed.

It was easiest just to tickle her—a very little, given that she was still in bondage to her machines.

"Don't, don't," Elena ordered just as his fingers made contact with her vulnerable side, covered only by her cloth hospital gown. "No, *please* don't! Look, I'm doing my homework, right? I have to do my homework before tomorrow! I'm writing about Warm Springs. You can help by reminding me of what happened on one of our picnics."

I was dead—or mostly—while you were having picnics, he thought. Then, more leniently, well, you only had the one and that was to amuse Alaric Saltzman when he came into town to see Meredith.

Even as he settled back and began spinning a story of what might have happened at Warm Springs for Elena's memoir, his mind dwelt lovingly on the happy days ahead when she would positively hate him . . . and still be unable to hold back her passionate response to his nearness.

* * *

Hours later, after Elena had finished her homework and been lulled to sleep, after Damon had wandered down a floor of the hospital in order to find fresh nurses, he came back to the ICU

room and sat in the chair, holding Elena's hand.

Eventually, he slept.

* * *

Damon dreamed.

He was back on the Nether World moon, with a stake through his body. Bad as that was, there was worse. He had used the last of the Power in his body in order to say goodbye to Elena, to Bonnie, to Stefan. They were gone now, certain that he was at rest. Instead, hideously, he was paralyzed but conscious. He had drifted into the darkness for a while, yes, but then he had found himself lying on his back while tiny flakes of ash and droplets of liquid fell on him, reviving him, and he had clenched his fist and known who he was.

But . . . ash? It didn't make sense. And the liquid . . . somehow the liquid was refreshing and invigorating. On this moon, where the sky had been blocked by the magnificent canopy of the one Tree that inhabited it, he was lying in the open with bits of debris falling on him.

Uh oh, he thought—deliberately frivolous since the pain of the stake through his body and the woody fibers that extended along his capillaries was still agonizing—someone has been a very, very naughty girl indeed.

There was only one reason for ash to be precipitating out of the sky. There was only one reason for the sheltering Tree to be gone so that he could *feel* ash being precipitated out of the sky.

Some bad girl had blown the Tree up. The ash was the remnants of that towering giant's trunk and branches and leaves.

Damon tried to flash a blinding, ferocious smile at nothing at all, but he couldn't; he was paralyzed, except for one hand that feebly clutched at the ashes by his side.

He knew what had happened though. While he had been in the dark place, Elena had unleashed the ultimate forbidden spell. Wings of Destruction.

He hoped that she hadn't blown herself and Bonnie and his little brother up, too. But since Damon's own body seemed to be intact, if ravaged by wood, she had probably protected them.

Damon certainly couldn't smell blood in the soft rain that fell.

What was the liquid, then? What was it that soothed the pain as it worked its heavy way below the ash to soak his clothes and face and hair?

He spent what seemed an eternity just wondering, as more and more of the wet droplets, each infinitesimal, lulled the agony that gripped his body.

By the time the answer finally came he was exasperated with himself. There was only one possibility and he was an idiot not to have recognized it at once. The largest star ball in all the worlds had been resting in the fork of the Tree just above where Damon had been staked. Elena had blown it up when she loosed destruction on the entire moon.

And now the liquid inside it, which was pure Power in fluid form, was falling directly down on him.

I'm not going to die, Damon realized, with a tiny *frisson* of concern rippling over his skin. He was not going to die, but was he going to lie here for all eternity, paralyzed and staked, conscious of nothing but the dreadful pain of the wood against his every cell?

Maybe not. Maybe he could set the liquid Power falling on him to work, drop by drop. Maybe it could slowly repair his nervous system, give him back the power to move again.

First, though, he had to get rid of what was poisoning his heart, what would defy any attempt at recovery. He had to get the stake out.

Pulling it—even if he could do that much with only his left hand working—would have the unfortunate consequence of ripping chunks of his heart out, too.

Almost without thinking, his left hand clenched into a fist around ashes soaked in droplets from the star ball full of pure Power. He packed the Power-loaded ash around the stake, around his chest and left upper arm. Then he dropped the fist and grasped a new handful of soaking ashes and did it again. And over and over and over.

After what seemed like a very long time Damon did something with his mind. He encircled the stake with Power and then let the Power flare. There was a moment of greater agony but then the

poison eating at his heart—a wooden stake six feet long and sunk four feet deep into the ground below him—simply disappeared.

Good, Damon thought, and he fell asleep for a while without dreaming, his body feeling cool and refreshed.

* * *

Stefan felt feverish.

He was finished with Fell's Church at last. He had saved the very hardest residence for the end, and it had drained him of Power until he was limp as a rag.

It had taken an enormous amount of Power to carefully dissect the memories of Meredith's parents. Mrs. Sulez, in particular, had hung to the knowledge that she had not just a daughter, but a son, Meredith's twin, who was a vampire. She also knew that her daughter was a secret vampire hunter, who had taken up the family ironwood stave, a spear that was meant to kill any kind of supernatural creature.

This stave was what Stefan had taken from Meredith's dorm room at Dalcrest and had hidden in the nearby woods, high in the trees, with a magical barrier around it making it invisible to humans and eldritch beings alike. He would have to go back and retrieve it to destroy it . . . but not now. Right now he was so tired . . .

Abruptly, the ground rushed up and struck Stefan a blow in the face. He had fallen, bruising his cheekbone and bloodying his nose.

Mrs. Flowers had been right, he thought, fumbling for the hipflask of Black Magic she had given him. Although several deep drafts were enough to heal the bruised place and his swelling nose, Stefan knew that he had burned all his natural Power away in dealing with the many minds he'd Influenced tonight.

He should have drunk human blood from some of the townsfolk he had used his neuro-virus on. If he had taken human blood then, it wouldn't be such a great question now whether he was going to be able to walk out of Fell's Church and into the Old Wood where he had hidden Elena's diaries in

his car.

Dawn was tinting the sky green and rose and cerulean in the east and Stefan automatically fumbled in his windbreaker pocket for sunglasses. Weak as he was right now, he needed all the light-protection he could get.

Put one foot ahead of the other. That was what he needed to do. In the Old Wood he could hunt and then rest and recover.

Just keep walking, he tried to encourage himself. It was only a couple of miles. There was no question but that he had to get away from direct sunlight, at least not if he wanted to live.

* * *

Elena woke up, yawning and stretching like a cat. Then she sneezed. Damon wondered if she was going to start grooming her fur, but instead she spotted him and smiled dreamily, which temporarily deprived him of the power to speak.

"Good morning," she said finally, and breathed deeply. Damon, who was holding a cup from which the unmistakable fragrance of mocha latte wafted, offered it to her.

"Bless you—but didn't you get something for yourself?"

"Drank it already, princess." Although Damon was not tired of nurses, who came in all shapes and sizes, he was aware that he had to be very careful. The hospital was still trying to solve the mystery of how Elena had lost so much blood, and it wouldn't do to have any of the medical staff keeling over from "anemia."

Elena was trying to brush her hair and drink her latte at the same time, all the while hampered by the tether of her IV. "I've just decided," she said in a determined, confidential voice. "Today you and I are busting out of this joint."

"We are, are we?" Damon felt the kind of tenderness he usually felt for—well, weaker girls—watching Elena fumbling helplessly. "Here, I'll handle the hair while you drink your caffeine," he added.

"Relax," he said. "I can handle this. You get impatient and split the ends when you yank it at

the bottom." He began to slowly work his way through her hair, gently teasing out the tangles.

"Split ends? You're really going to get it," Elena said, clearly trying to sound ominous and failing entirely as her body had become suddenly pliant. She really was *very* sensitive to having her hair handled, Damon reflected. "Nobody's done that for me since my mother died," she added abruptly, tilting her head as he required. "I never would let Aunt Judith help. I don't know why I'm letting you do it."

Damon knew, but all he said was, "Let's talk about you getting released today, even if it's against medical advice."

Once they'd discussed their plans, Elena completed her toilette alone. The doctors' morning rounds interrupted her as she sought to wreak the revenge of a thousand kisses upon Damon for his early impudence in brushing her hair.

Everything was relatively simple after that. The doctors, with only a slight push from Damon, decided that Elena was more of a nuisance to modern medicine than a conundrum.

Red tape held the release process stationary all that morning, but by late afternoon Elena was able to leave, traveling by wheelchair to the curb outside Mercy Havenwick's doors. Damon had flown back to the seedy bar in Pine Grove and retrieved his Ferrari Spider the previous night. They departed for Dalcrest in high style and excellent spirits.

Back at the dorm, Bonnie and Meredith and Matt and Caroline had gotten together and fixed up Elena's room so that it was truly a thing of beauty. They had decorated one wall with a giant wooden letter *E* painted turquoise and gold, with pictures framed in lavender, turquoise and gold all around it. A whiteboard was hung on another wall with "*Welcome Home Elena!"* written in Meredith's best calligraphic script.

They had gotten rid of Elena's single bed and replaced it with a queen-sized one that sported lavender linen. It was topped with a thick comforter decorated with sprawling exotic flowers in lavender and turquoise. The study desk was neatly prepared with Elena's desktop and laptop computers, a scanner-printer, and an organizer with cubby holes that held pens, pencils, a stapler, a

small first aid kit, and other necessary things. Elena's textbooks were stacked neatly against the wall below the cubbies.

A tiny fridge, a smaller microwave and a large HD TV hanging like a painting on the wall across from the bed provided Elena with true luxury, while a dresser in distressed white with freshly-painted lavender, gold and turquoise filigree accents held her clothes.

Battery operated pillar candles cast flickering, cheery light here and there, since burning real candles in dorm rooms was forbidden. The scent of lavender-vanilla potpourri filled the air.

"Oh, my God," Elena said, choking up as she looked around. "All of you did this. How am I supposed to thank you?"

"By staying healthy," Matt suggested.

"By keeping out of trouble," Caroline added.

"Caroline, you come sit down right now," Elena said, and the pregnant girl obeyed by taking the comfortable lounge chair in the corner. Bonnie perched on one side of the bed and Elena insisted on Meredith sitting at the desk, while she and the boys stood.

"It's beautiful," Elena continued, "and I'm going to think about you fondly whenever I see it. Bless you all."

"We had fun," Meredith said simply, and Bonnie smiled, flushed with pleasure.

Elena, still smiling, regarded her new and improved bed.

"I'm going to sleep right in the middle," she said. "Just like at home."

"No you're not," Damon said, hoping to get this issue over with as little fuss as possible. "Because you only get one side. I'm moving in and I'll be on the other."

"You *what*?" Elena said, staring. Then she added vehemently, "You *can't*. You can't do that."

"Watch me."

"You can't just move in with me! I made a solemn promise to my Aunt Judith!"

"Elena, we all talked about this," Meredith put in quietly. "You can't be alone. One of us

has to be with you in case—well, you know why. I'd do it, but I hate to leave Bonnie on her own while she's having these weird trance-things."

"They scare me," Bonnie added sadly, in a very small voice.

"They scare me, too, and I don't want you to leave her, Meredith," Elena said. "But the rest of it is just impossible. You can't vote me into having guy sleeping on my bed. I told Aunt Judith—"

"The hell with Aunt Judith." Damon said it with no particular emphasis, but it stopped Matt and Caroline, who were ready to jump into the conversation. "Elena, I really don't want to upset her, but you're over eighteen. And I'm moving in for one reason: to protect you. To make sure that what happened to you before *never* happens again. All right?"

"No, damn it! It's not all right at all. Nobody says to me: 'Oh, we've already discussed things and we're putting a guy in bed with you.' That's not anybody else's decision to make." Elena was incandescent in fury.

Damon took her by the shoulders, forcing her to look him in the eye. He didn't want to have to Influence Elena—in fact, he preferred not to Influence anyone in front of Bonnie, who seemed to be picking up on channels of telepathy. But if plain sense didn't work he was going to have to use Power.

"Look, the point is that you can't be by yourself, and I'm not going to let Meredith abandon Bonnie, either. Don't you realize"—he tightened his grip just slightly—"you still don't know how you lost that blood! You were attacked somehow. *I am not leaving you alone*."

Damon himself wasn't sure why he was so adamant about this subject, since he knew exactly how Elena had lost her blood. Still, from the very beginning, when he'd asked Meredith to find a new bed to put in Elena's room, he'd felt in his bones that he needed to watch over her at night. The voice from Bonnie's trances had specifically threatened Elena's life. That might mean much or little. Bonnie could have succumbed to all sorts of psychic influences that her mind would interpret as anathema. But somehow, Damon couldn't just ignore those warnings.

Elena was winding up for a scathing reply when she stopped midway through and thought.

Damon could see it in her face. She looked long and hard at Bonnie and then slowly, *slowly*, began to relax. Finally she seemed to rein in her temper.

"We'll talk about this later. Caroline, do you want Matt sleeping in *your* room?"

"Me?" The auburn-haired girl looked awkward, while Matt just blinked rapidly. "No. I think that I can—um, take care of myself."

"That's what I thought, too," Elena said with half of a wry smile. "I guess, though, that I'm the one in the crosshairs."

Damon allowed himself to feel relief and satisfaction, although he knew that at least half of Elena's sudden about-face was due to her not wanting to discuss their personal business in front of even her closest friends.

You think you're stubborn, he mused, as Elena turned to talk about the wonders of her room to Bonnie. But you haven't even begun to *guess* at how stubborn I am. I've had centuries to perfect what was a pretty damn stubborn attitude from the beginning.

If I have to, I'll Influence you to agree with me. I probably should have done that in the beginning. I seem to remember promising I wouldn't, but I believe that promise also had a time limit that ran out.

* * *

Stefan woke up feeling overheated and dizzy. He was in the Old Woods, the restored and cleansed Old Woods.

He was hungry.

Tiger-hungry, he thought. Wolf-hungry. Hungry enough to bite a blind beggar in a churchyard.

Hungry enough to take down the first prey that crossed his path.

Automatically, as his hand groped in his jeans pocket, he looked around the small clearing where he had collapsed last night. He had hunted a deer then, and almost drained it before the dizziness and darkness had overtaken him and he had fallen, exhausted, into fever-dreams.

At least his task was done, he thought. Wasn't it done? His hand closed on the hipflask, which was disappointingly light when he opened it and lifted it to his lips.

Three tantalizing drops fell onto his parched tongue. That was all. He stuffed the flask back in his pocket.

Where was the deer? Although he had wished it no harm, he would have sworn that he had taken enough blood that it should have become a carcass by now.

Maybe something—and his mind brought up an unpleasant picture of a couple of wolves turning into people—had taken it out of the clearing. Or maybe he had wandered away from the clearing where he had fallen in his sleep, which had been restless and fitful.

Or perhaps he had drunk less than he thought and the deer had been able to rise and stumble back into the sheltering trees while he was unconscious. That might make the most sense, and would explain his broken sleep and ravenous awakening.

It was strange, but even in prison he had never felt quite this desperate for blood. Even when he had been dying, it had never been this bad. The closer he'd gotten to dying, the more peaceful he'd been then.

This hunger was like wearing a white-hot suit underneath his skin. It burned and itched and stung over every inch of his body, while claws tore at his internal organs.

It urged him into walking unsteadily, trying to be noiseless and stealthy, trying to listen for the tiny sounds of prey and look for the tiny signs that would shape his path.

But how to be stealthy when every step threatens to lead to a searing, raging darkness? How to hear when your ears are already thrumming with your own heartbeat? How to see when vision is distorted and wavers between too close and too distant?

There! A fern was bent. It had been trodden upon and the lacy green triangle that lay flat on the ground acted as an arrow to show the direction of the animal that had disturbed it. Stefan followed, sweat collecting on his forehead as he concentrated all the Power he could summon into his eyes.

Steady vision. Steady vision. A few leaves were dislocated and a print showed clearly in the moist ground between them. It was the double teardrop and crescent shape of a white-tailed deer's hoof. The print was easily five and a half inches long and very deep. A buck, then, and no slender yearling. A big fellow, from three to six years old. Exactly what Stefan needed.

Now that he was on the trail his body seemed to switch to automatic mode. He followed each of the buck's strides as if he were being pulled along on a string. He had done this so many times; it was so blessedly easy to see his way. Stefan began to run and felt his legs stable underneath him. He was gaining on the buck, for its strides remained of a uniform length; it was ambling along, heedless of any danger.

Stefan burst into a clearing and saw a magnificent red-brown animal in front of him, its antlers a miracle, a miniature forest towering on its head. The velvet hung in taters from some of the tines.

Stefan's canine teeth were sharpening even as he leaped forward, seizing the buck by its rack even as he knocked it off balance. His fangs cut through the wiry summer coat to the carotid artery in the buck's neck. Immediately rich blood fountained into Stefan's mouth. He didn't remember deer blood being as energizing and delicious as this, but then he couldn't remember ever being so desperate to feed before.

I'm sorry, cousin, he thought, Influencing the animal to rest quietly and feel nothing. *Your life is my sacrifice to my own internal beast today. But you won't feel it ebbing away, I promise. Sleep now and dream of being a fawn with your mother. I'm sure you've sired some beautiful fawns yourself in your time.*

The buck lay quiet. Great gushes of blood, pumped by its strong heart, fountained into Stefan's mouth and scarcely a drop was lost. The hot red liquid tasted of exotic spices, of port wine, of black currants, cherry, and cassis. No animal's blood had ever been so smooth, so soothing to Stefan's fever, so delectable.

It was strange, though, that although Stefan's hunger was gradually appeased, he did not become less lightheaded. In fact, he felt darkness settling around him like a heavy, thick fog of warm

air. His appetite was blunted, but so were his senses. The last thing he remembered before the darkness pulled him into the folds of a velvety black cloak was a vague curiosity about whether he might be dying.

* * *

With her friends gone, Elena vaguely planned to confront Damon. But she had to figure out exactly what to say to make sure she could convince him she was able to protect herself.

She sat down at the desk, where she found a pretty journal in the cubby, with a cover of lavender crushed velvet. She was supposed to start keeping a journal for her English class. Once she'd picked up this one, she felt she couldn't put it down without writing in it, and there was a fresh black ballpoint pen waiting for her. She untwisted the pale lavender ribbon that held the journal closed from its carved silver button and opened it.

She began to write about how frustrated she was with Damon, but to explain why she was frustrated she had to go back and recount the details of why he thought she needed protection.

Soon, engrossed in her task, she was writing fluently, her hand in direct contact with her brain, the pen streaking over the journal's pages.

She was so involved that she scarcely noticed when Damon settled on the bed and turned on her new TV. He kept the volume low, but if it had been blasting into her ears, she wouldn't have heard a word. She was in her own world now, unconscious of anything but the strange story she told.

* * *

Stefan slowly came to consciousness inside his black Porsche. The proximity key was in his jeans' pocket, as was the empty hipflask.

At first he felt all the normal uneasiness of the sleepwalker, but then a desperate searching of his mind yielded up a fragmented picture of what had happened after he had finished feeding on the red-brown buck. He saw himself sink into sleep and then, long hours later, half-awaken slowly and rise, feeling renewed. Sorrow for the dead buck had gripped him briefly, but there was no point in sentimentalizing over what was already done. Evening was coming on, and if there were no ordinary

wolves in the Old Wood, Stefan strongly suspected that there were werewolves. He had left the buck's carcass for them to deal with and had stumbled in the direction of his car. His hunger was satisfied, but he was literally sleepwalking as he tracked down the Porsche. He had fumbled the door open and gotten inside, oversensitive to the smell of leather. And then he had simply locked the doors and reclined his seat as far as it would go, which wasn't very far. He fallen into a very heavy sleep then, surrounded by the feeling of luxury and safety, his Power fully restored.

But now . . . it was night and his head was clear at last. Elena's diaries and a few photos that he had taken from her bedroom on Maple Street were safely piled in the passenger seat.

Time to get on the move. He pushed the starter button and the Porsche purred to life. He drove out of the Old Wood and toward the forest that lay beyond Dalcrest College. There he could pick up Meredith's fighting stave and—

—check on Elena—

—*consider what his next move should be*, he told himself sternly. He was glad to have the whole business of Influencing humans behind him. Once he had—

—checked on Elena—

—destroyed the diaries and the stave, he could begin to lead a normal life again, somewhere far away from here.

Far from Elena, who would forever be the best part of him. He lightly touched the small lapis ring that hung on the apricot ribbon around his neck. Both had belonged to her; both he had kept as mementoes when she need them no longer. He couldn't even imagine what it would be like to wake up and not immediately think of Elena.

Ten minutes to the Dyer Woods, Stefan turned on the radio to distract himself. He was finding it difficult to control his speed as he got closer and closer to—

—Elena—

—the place where he could finish his business.

News for commuters blared out of the car's speakers. Stefan flinched and hurriedly dialed

down the volume. He tried to work up an interest as he heard of more trouble in the Middle East and the effects of rampant global warming. But the words slid by, unheard for the most part, until one phrase seemed to leap out and echo in his ear.

". . . local news, the nearly-exsanguinated girl from Fell's Church is in serious condition at Beckley Memorial Hospital in Heron. Police say that there are no suspects as of yet in this mysterious crime, but that her eighteen-year-old boyfriend is a person of interest. Traffic and weather together in three minutes."

Stefan found himself gripping the steering wheel so hard that it creaked.

What the hell?

They had it all wrong. Everything about Elena except that she was from Fell's Church. The wrong hospital, the wrong town that the hospital was in, the wrong age for Damon, who had been just-turned-twenty-one for five hundred years. Even the condition of the patient had to be wrong, since Elena had been essentially cured when Stefan left.

Why all the misinformation?

A thought struck him. The police often kept details of serious crimes secret or changed them, knowing that only the true perpetrator could correct the details, thus saving them time from kooks with false confessions. Maybe that was what was happening here . . .

And maybe not. Why should the criminal know which hospital the girl was in, or what her current condition was?

Stefan found his muscles tense with agitation. What if it was merely incredibly bad reporting? What if Elena had had a relapse or had been transferred to a different hospital? What if someone had fingered Stefan, who was eighteen, instead of Damon, as Elena's boyfriend?

Now Stefan could give into his temptation. He *had* to give into it before he could even consider leaving this area behind him. He needed to see Elena and talk to Damon as soon as possible.

* * *

At dinnertime, people began to show up at Elena's door once again. Isobel Saitou and Jim Bryce stopped in to congratulate Elena on her recovery, and Elena looked happy, as always, to see the quiet Japanese girl and her tall, basketball-playing boyfriend. Damon gave the couple a tiny push to gracefully say goodbye after twenty minutes had passed. He preferred not to have anyone around who might remind Elena of kitsune grandmothers or Stefan's kidnapping by the fox-spirits.

Bonnie and Meredith, Matt and Caroline came as one group, and, after much chattering and argument about toppings, ordered four large pizzas from a local restaurant. Everyone settled in to watch Elena's TV and began to argue all over again, this time as to which movie to order. No one said a word about whether Damon was moving in with Elena or not—but, Damon reflected, they hardly had to, given that Damon had divested himself of his leather jacket and was now lying at ease on the double bed, with pillows propping up his shoulders.

Meredith ended holding the TV's remote and she put on a local news channel. And that, Damon reflected later, was when everything started to go to hell in a hand-basket.

Damon had been covertly watching Caroline, who once again was occupying the lounge chair in the corner as per Elena's orders. He was wondering if the girl had been changing into her wolf-form recently. It must certainly be more comfortable than her present awkward gourd-shaped body.

He had just begun to tally up the numbers of other werewolves that he had been considering stalking before Bonnie's psychic scream had split his world in the seedy Pine Grove bar, when Meredith cried out, "Everybody—listen! Be quiet! *Shut up!"*

She was staring as if entranced at the television. Talk ceased immediately and everyone followed her gaze.

A news anchor was saying ". . . that senior from Robert E. Lee High School is still in serious condition tonight at Beckley Memorial Hospital. Doctors there say that the girl was found lying outside the Emergency Room, and required massive transfusions throughout the day to replace the large volume of blood she had lost.

"The Heron police are not releasing many details about the cryptic case, but a source close to the Fell's Church sheriffs' department says that the authorities are interested in speaking to the girl's eighteen-year-old boyfriend, also a student at Robert E. Lee High.

"The Heron County Blood Bank is sponsoring a blood drive, saying that donations have dropped over twenty percent this last summer. They noted that low levels of donated blood could prove lethal for some patients if a hospital were faced with 'another mysterious exsanguination, or a major accident that will really drive up usage.' In other news . . ."

Meredith muted the TV. There was silence in the room. Damon was on his feet, as were Matt, Meredith, and Elena. Matt had automatically reached for his mobile and spoke as his fingers rapidly found the same news on the Internet.

Then, slowly, he said, "Another one."

"Another . . . attack like Elena's . . ." Meredith began, but didn't finish the sentence.

"But they said someone from Robert E. Lee," Bonnie whispered. "That means we probably know whoever it is—someone who was a junior last year . . ." Her words, too, trailed off.

"It's not possible," Damon said mechanically, stiff in the jaw, his mind whirling with a hundred thoughts at once.

"It has to be possible. It happened," Caroline pointed out.

"Or maybe it's different," Bonnie said, looking desperate for comfort. "They didn't say that this girl's blood just disappeared. If they're looking for her boyfriend then they must have some reason to suspect him."

"They think she was pregnant and miscarried," Elena said, in a brittle, precise voice. Her face was pale. "That's what they kept insisting on with me. They kept asking if I'd lost a baby. And there must be *something* strange going on with her because that newswoman said it was a cryptic case and a mysterious exsanguination. So . . . it's another case *exactly* like mine."

But it couldn't be, Damon thought giddily. There had to be some kind of mistake. Unless it was some kind of copycat criminal who had admired Stefan's work and wanted to challenge him.

He liked the sound of that. Copycat criminal. He had no idea why imitators were called copycats instead of copy-monkeys or something more rational, but copycat crimes were well-known throughout the world these days. Someone—some vampire—had heard about Elena's case, and hadn't been able to resist trying out their own version.

But . . . upon a student from the same school that Stefan and Elena had attended? a little voice in his head seemed to say. And, further, why hadn't Damon already sensed a foreign vampire on his own territory? He had wards all over this area that should have warned him. Being dead—or mostly—for as long as he had under the ash in the Nether World had given him new ideas of how safe he was in an area like Fell's Church where crossing ley lines attracted all sorts of rabble.

Now, standing still and silent in Elena's dorm room, he sent out a probe of Power in all directions to see what he could see. After five separate probes, he was even more bewildered than he had been when he started. There was no sign of a new vampire, so if one was around it had to be

clever enough to fool him. The werewolves showed up in every city within an hour's distance as the crow flew, but he couldn't sense any particular agitation among them—smug bastards that they were. He could feel the glow of Mrs. Flowers' kitchen witchcraft on the edge of Fell's Church, and he could strongly sense Bonnie's powers in the dorm room beside him.

But none of that mattered. There was something heading toward Dalcrest College that put everything else out of his mind. A psychic signature that was familiar but distorted, thrumming with raw Power as he had only seen it two or three times before.

It was Stefan. Still in the area and with an aura that no vampire got from drinking the blood of animals. Stefan, blazing with Power, was headed this way in his Porsche.

How the devil had Stefan come by so much eldritch energy? And why was he advertising an aura like that?

To keep away small-fry, brother, a voice in Damon's head replied. It wasn't his own inner voice; it was Stefan's. Stefan had deftly caught and tracked his probe and was now sending on a tight channel just to Damon.

Twenty minutes, Stefan's telepathic message ran. *My dorm room. Be there, Damon.*

Half an hour, Damon bargained automatically. *But—*

Just one word more, Stefan sent, and tension was crackling in his mental voice. *Is Elena all right? Is she in another hospital?*

She's fine. She's standing right here. We all are. We just saw on the news—

Half an hour, in my dorm room, Stefan cut in brusquely. *Then we can talk.*

As suddenly as it had come, the voice was gone from Damon's mind. He refocused on what was happening in the physical world around him.

"What on earth is going on?" Caroline was saying, when a soft, hollow, and terrifying whisper suddenly answered her.

"It is a sacrifice. A sacrifice of humans."

"Bonnie—*no!"* Meredith exclaimed, and Matt groaned, "Not again."

While Damon had been talking to Stefan, Bonnie had found her way into the corner opposite him and had her hands over her face.

"Listen to her," he said sharply. "But don't touch her, anyone. I promise not to use shock treatment." He was probing once again, trying to classify what Bonnie looked like in this state and what she might be connected to. His probes were coming back fuzzy, blurred with feedback interference. "Look, we need to find out where she's getting these ideas. Keep her talking!"

"Bonnie." Elena's voice unsteady but her tone was demanding. "We don't understand you. What kind of sacrifice?"

"Blood sacrifice," Bonnie answered in a glutinous voice that made the hairs on Damon's arms lift. "This is the second, but more is needed from Elena."

Elena was closer to Bonnie than anyone else in the room. She looked doubtful, wetting her lips. But she kept her head, Damon noticed, as he continued to probe around Bonnie, trying to find whatever was feeding her this slop.

"Why should anyone need more from me?" Elena said in a careful, coaxing tone. "What could anyone want?"

"Blood and death." The horrific answer came back in a maddeningly matter-of-fact tone. "That is the purpose of sacrifice. There will be more sacrifices soon."

Meredith opened her mouth, but Elena, without even glancing back, waved a quelling hand at her. "I still don't understand, Bonnie," she said, moving stealthily until she was just behind the petite girl. "What do you think anyone would need blood sacrifices for? Or death?"

Even Damon, who was busy examining his little redbird to see exactly who was holding the strings of this ghastly marionette show, couldn't have predicted what would happen next.

Bonnie whirled in her corner, hands flying down, and looked directly at Elena. Her face was distorted into a hideous leer, her small mouth twisted and grinning like a panting dog's.

"FOR *FUN!*" she shouted in a hoarse voice not at all like her own light one.

Elena fell back as if she had been struck. Meredith darted to prop her up, then sat her on the

bed and lunged forward again as Caroline shrilled a cry and Bonnie collapsed. Meredith wasn't able to get to Bonnie quickly enough and there was a dull thud as Bonnie's head hit the wall.

As if to echo it, there were four loud knocks at the door.

Everyone jumped, but no one said a word. Frightened glances were exchanged. Damon, frustrated in his attempt to trace any energy signature to Bonnie, strode forward to meet whatever new danger lay outside.

He grabbed the doorknob and nearly wrenched the door off its hinges in opening it.

"Who the hell are *you*?" he demanded of the figure in the hallway.

"Uh . . . I'm from Amici's?" A freckled delivery girl stepped forward hesitantly. "Someone ordered four large pizzas with everything?"

Damon deflated, hearing sighs behind him. "I suppose someone did," he admitted and pulled a hundred dollar bill off his silver money clip. "Keep the change," he said briefly, and shut the door on the girl's astonished face. He dumped the four hot, square, greasy boxes on the nearest flat surface and turned to look at the queen-size bed.

Meredith had put the unconscious Bonnie on one side. Matt was talking to Elena, his arm around her shoulders, as she sat at the foot. Caroline had struggled up out of the lounge chair and was regarding the entire scene with an introspective frown.

"Get some ice out of the fridge," Damon ordered her, and he went to check on his girls. "Then put it in a paper towel or something."

"Are you all right?" he asked Elena. He pulled out his hipflask and made her drink a little Black Magic, ignoring Matt's raised eyebrows.

The Black Magic helped. A hint of color showed in Elena's drawn face and her body relaxed a bit.

"She—startled me, that's all," Elena said briefly. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Who was?" Matt muttered. He looked pleadingly at Damon. "What's happening to Bonnie? Can you tell? Why is she saying all this crazy—stuff?"

Damon had to look away from his trusting young face. "I don't know what's going on," he said harshly. "But I'm going to find out, you can bet on that. Matt, in a few minutes I'm going outside. I have to—well, do something that might help Bonnie and Elena. I can't explain now, but will you watch Elena while I'm gone? Promise not to leave her alone even for a minute?"

"Of course," Matt said instantly. His eyes were questioning, but his voice was steady. As if I were Stefan, Damon thought sardonically.

He pushed his way by so that he could stand beside Meredith, who was bent over Bonnie. "What's going on?"

"She went into another . . . psychogenic trance thing," Meredith said, apparently thinking he might have missed it.

"How is she *now*, though?" Damon accepted the ice pack that Caroline slid across the bed.

"I don't know. She seems a little feverish, but—well, frankly, I have no idea at all what's going on!"

"I'm trying to figure it out, too," Damon said sincerely. "But I have no clue as to what the problem is. Here, put this on her head where she bumped it. Did you hear what I asked Matt to do for Elena?"

"It would have been hard not to."

"Will you do the same for Bonnie? Not leave her alone tonight, even for a few minutes?"

"Of course," Meredith said, sounding indignant. "I'd do it whether you asked me or not. But I think I'll take her back to our room if she wakes up."

"Fine, but don't try to force her awake. I have a feeling that it could be dangerous. And when she wakes up naturally, don't ask too many questions."

Damon! The telepathic voice was unmistakable. *I'm waiting in my dorm room for you. And I don't even sense you moving.*

Sense this, Damon sent back rudely, and he added a few crude epithets in Italian. *We're having a slight crisis here, but I'll be there in ten minutes,* he added.

Five minutes. There was a *lot* of Power behind the message.

Whatever, Damon replied, trying to sound nonchalant. But once outside Elena's room, he broke into a distance-eating run.

He was almost on time. He would have been closer, except that he spent a minute or two outside Soto Hall strafing probes randomly in all directions. He still couldn't believe it when he came up with no vampire other than Stefan.

Stefan opened the door of his room looking angry and accusing. Damon reflexively fell back into his most bland and leisurely expression and lounged his way inside.

"What the hell is going on?" Stefan demanded. "If Elena is here, who were they talking about on the radio?"

"And hello to you, too," Damon said languidly. "I'm fine, thanks for asking."

"I don't care how you are. When did—did Elena get released? You said she was with you."

The slight stutter made Damon glance up sharply. He realized that if one looked closely enough, Stefan's bravado was just that: bravado. Underneath, he was desperately worried.

Damon felt the upper hand slide smoothly onto his fist. He sat down on the bed in the spartan room.

"Elena was released from Mercy Havenwick this afternoon," he said expressionlessly. "She's in her room now, watching TV—or at least she was."

"Then she's really all right."

"She's better than all right; she's been chafing at the bit to get out of that hospital since this morning. She was cured by the time you left her. But are you certain *you're* all right, little brother?"—very solicitously.

Stefan froze over. "Oh, yes, I'm just fine. It's always been my vocation in life to erase my existence from the world."

"So you've finished, then?"

"I finished—last night." Again the audible hesitation. Damon's little brother had something

on his mind.

"You got the diaries?"

"I did everything. Everything to everyone," Stefan said impatiently.

Damon stretched, catlike. "Sounds like fun," he murmured, but the next second he added, "Then what are you doing still on campus?"

"I just drove back to collect Meredith's fighting stave. I hid it in the forest here."

"And I see," Damon commented genially, "that you've been taking my advice for once."

"What are you talking about?"

"You've discovered that you need human blood for survival."

Stefan, who had been a tensely pacing young man, became a tensely leaping blur as he sprang and got his hands around Damon's throat. Damon, caught by surprise, could only get a mirror hold on Stefan's throat and try to choke him into unconsciousness.

"Take it back!" Stefan shouted. "Take it back or I swear I'll break your playacting neck!"

Damon, too smart to use up Power-enhancing air by speaking, sent telepathically: *I can take it back if you like, but it isn't going to change the facts. You've fed on a human today.*

I have not! Stefan replied passionately. *I took down a twelve-point buck! Ever since I left Dalcrest I've had only animal blood—animal! That and Black Magic!*

Damon tried to think while being throttled. He supposed it was just possible that Stefan was telling the truth. Sometimes a particularly large and experienced animal could boost Power in a marvelous way. A handsome stag at the height of its autumn strength, ready to fight and full of mating hormones, might have the kind of blood that mimicked a human's. Certainly Stefan believed what he was saying.

All right, Damon said strategically. *I'll take it back. You're still an animal-lover and I'm just a humanitarian.*

The moment Stefan's grip on him slackened, Damon moved fast, getting Stefan into a half-Nelson and holding him still.

"But I'm afraid," he said out loud, "that I could be pretty easily convinced to kill you right now. I don't normally forgive being attacked for no reason. Is that understood, little brother?"

Kill me if you want to. I'd consider it a favor at this point. You have Elena; you might as well have my life, too.

"Tch, tch. Always so dramatic," Damon murmured. "I have Elena because you wrote me into her brain—without my permission. And I already have your life, because you wrote me into your place in *everyone's* brains—as a human—again without my permission. I'm not feeling overly tolerant this evening for some reason."

Stefan made no attempt to free himself. *I said it before. Kill me if you like.*

Damon hesitated a long moment and then let his brother go. Stefan sat up and rubbed the back of his neck.

"What's she doing right now?" he asked, getting out each word separately, reluctantly. "Is she really healthy?"

"I don't know what she's *doing* right now," Damon said flatly, "but what she was *watching* on TV a little while ago was the local news."

Stefan froze over again and refused to speak. That alone told Damon volumes.

"Look," he said, working hard to keep animosity out of his voice, "so there's another girl who lost most of her bloodstream today. What else is going on in your fuzzy little head?"

Stefan's voice was dull. "I had to make sure that it wasn't Elena they were talking about on the radio. There weren't many details, but they said she was in serious condition. And I wanted to talk to you."

Damon touched his throat. "Pithy way of talking."

Stefan's eyes blazed suddenly. "You have no idea how exhausting it was, taking away memory after memory. Yes, I was tempted to drink from lots of the humans I Influenced. But I decided I would rather die."

"Each to his own," Damon murmured. Out loud he said, "Have you found the other

vampire?"

"What other vampire?"

"The one who did the copycat thing, putting that new girl in the hospital with Elena's symptoms," Damon said impatiently.

"Copycat?" Stefan said blankly. Despite the amount of Power in his aura, he didn't look either sharp or stable to Damon.

"Think," Damon suggested. "First, you almost drain Elena while you're . . . well, merging souls or whatever. Her condition must have made the news. So, now, some copycat vampire has done something similar to a second girl—although I doubt the two of them did a lot of soul-merging. It probably was a straight-out draining job."

Stefan blinked. "Then you don't think it was me?"

Damon blinked in turn. "What the *hell* are you talking about?"

"I thought—when I heard about the girl on the radio I thought at first that they must mean Elena. But then, the more I wondered about it—well, you're right, drinking animal blood doesn't usually give so much Power. I thought that maybe, while I was out Influencing people, I might have gone overboard and bit someone. There were times when I was almost blacking out, especially when I had to walk back to the Old Wood to get my car."

Damon leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "Sometimes I really think you're insane," he said confidentially.

"Sometimes I almost believe you might not be," was the bitter reply.

"Stefan, if you had drained a girl while you were Influencing her, you'd remember. Besides, you wouldn't have been blacking out at the end. You'd have had more than enough Power to get to your car. Therefore, it was someone else."

"Who?"

"I don't suppose you've been scanning or probing for a Power signature that would fit a new vampire," Damon said thoughtfully.

"No. It never occurred to me."

"Well, it occurred to me, and I've been doing it since I saw the news story. I haven't found anything."

"Which means that somehow I still could have done it. Although, after the buck I wasn't hungry at all, only tired to death."

"Where did you hunt this magical buck?"

"Where do you think? In the Old Woods. First I found a doe, then I slept, but I woke up hungry again. I tracked this gorgeous buck and—I killed him. I hated to do it, but he was full of energy."

"A shape-changer?" Damon wondered aloud.

"No, no. It was just a beautiful reddish-brown buck with an incredible aura. After that I slept through the day. And then, just as I told you, I was driving back to pick up Meredith's fighting stave when I heard the news on the radio." Stefan shrugged. "I can scan the area now."

Damon let him. He wasn't surprised when Stefan came up with no results. But they were over half an hour away from Fell's Church, and even farther from Heron. The girl had presumably been attacked either where she lived or where she'd been hospitalized. Someone that far away might be able to hide among the werewolves that inevitably showed up on any scan.

"There's another reason it couldn't have been you," Damon said when Stefan admitted defeat. "Bonnie's been going into trances again."

"What? What did she say?"

"The first two times were just general scare-everybody stuff, like 'You're all going to die.' But tonight, right after the news broadcast she said that—well, essentially that both Elena and the new girl were sacrifices. Blood sacrifices. Also that whoever was behind the sacrifices was going to continue making them. . . for 'fun.'"

Stefan's head came up. "But how can—what I did with Elena—be part of anyone else's sacrifice?"

"I don't know. Although Bonnie did mention tonight that something more was going to happen to Elena. She didn't specify what. And that first night at Mercy Havenwick she said that Elena was going to die."

"And you never even thought about telling me?" Stefan asked in a deadly cold voice.

"Honestly? No, I didn't. I imagined that you had enough to deal with already. And besides, at the hospital I didn't really take anything Bonnie said in trance too seriously. I thought she was picking up on some insane patient's nightmares or something."

Stefan shut his eyes and shook his head slowly. Then he pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm getting a headache."

"Serves you right," Damon said unkindly. "You've been giving them to me for half a millennium."

"*How?* By not screaming loudly enough when you attacked me? By occasionally finding someplace to hide where you couldn't persecute me?"

Damon decided that discreet silence was the better part of valor for the moment. He merely smiled faintly.

"You realize," Stefan said heavily, "that I can't leave now. Not until I'm certain that she's going to be safe."

Damon had his own private theory as to whether Stefan would have been able to leave under any circumstances, but all he said, "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Stefan shrugged. "I can't leave you supposedly watching over Elena when half the time your eye is on Bonnie."

There was a silence.

It stretched. Damon was trying to figure out what the proper response to a comment like this would be.

A full thirty seconds later, he decided. Wordlessly, he dove for Stefan, got his hands around Stefan's neck, and tried to throttle the undeath out of him.

This time Stefan didn't try to choke him in return. He gathered a huge amount of Power and let it loose at Damon at point-blank range.

Lights went off behind Damon's eyes. He didn't feel the pain at the moment, though. That was part of his last-ditch weapon during fights: to store up the pain for later. It kept his head clear and had the added benefit of making him never want to stop fighting.

He prepared his own bolus of Power and slammed it into Stefan. Stefan flinched slightly and Damon pressed his advantage, knocking his brother into the nightstand with the lamp on it. There was a splintering crash as the nightstand went over and the lamp shattered on the ground and went out.

The two of them went on fighting for quite a while in what, to humans, would have been pitch darkness. Occasionally one or the other would snap sharpened canines at his opponent, because to bleed another vampire is to finish the fight with honors. They were too evenly matched, however, for either of them to manage this.

Eventually, Damon got tired of trading blows and blasts. He could feel how much Stefan's responses had slowed down, and he made a sudden feint by going limp, and then, when Stefan was pinned on the floor by his dead weight, he struck like a cobra for his brother's neck. The tip of one canine just grazed a vein and a small and bitter amount of vampire blood spurted into his mouth.

Stefan went limp in his turn, but Damon didn't bother to check whether it was a feint or not. He simply dragged his own body up and away, and forced his muscles to leave him propped languidly against the wall. He pressed some button in his brain and all the various pains and indignities he had suffered during the fight washed over him. They hurt, but he was still standing when his head cleared.

Stefan was getting up now, apparently seeking the bed to sit on, but uselessly since it had been overturned in the early stages of the fight. At last he found the chair that went with the desk (also now overturned) and collapsed on it.

Damon felt a little better. It had been a strange, silent battle, without any of the usual elaborate Italian cursing involved, but he felt he had made his point. He'd also proved, as if it

needed to be established, that human blood would always provide superior Power, and that Stefan's diet of animal blood was always going to betray him sooner or later.

Damon did his best at lounging against the wall and tried to remember exactly why he had attacked his younger brother in the first place. Oh, yes. Stefan had gotten fresh about Damon's girls and Damon wasn't going to let anyone get away with that.

"If you don't mind," Damon said, managing one gorgeous smile at nothing in particular, "let's consider that particular subject closed."

Stefan was still trying to make sure that he still had the normal complement of limbs, fingers and ears. At last he said, sullenly, "You can close as many subjects as you want. But I'm not leaving until I'm certain that Elena is reasonably safe."

"Fine," Damon said sarcastically. "Why didn't you just say so in the beginning? It would have saved trouble. You can stay in this room if you want to—possibly after some major redecorating," he added, looking around. They had done a pretty thorough job.

"Of course I can't stay here," Stefan said heatedly. "*You're* staying here."

"Of course I'm not staying here," Damon replied, his voice icy with contempt. "I'm staying with Elena in her room."

"You're . . . moving in with her? That's what you're planning?"

"I already have moved in. And I've been through one big noisy fuss about it already, so don't even think about starting another."

Stefan was briefly silent. Then he said slowly, "So you're sleeping on her floor?"

Damon lost his temper. "Little brother, *you* were the one who set all this up, right? You set me up to live like Elena's *human* lover. Just exactly what were you expecting me to do?"

"To watch over Elena the way you did back when she first became a vampire," Stefan said passionately. "Do you even remember that? The days when you watched over her without—without taking advantage of her!"

"No, that's not true: what you expected. You knew exactly what you were doing when you

made me her 'boyfriend of a year.' *You* set this all up. And you presume that I should behave completely differently from you when she loved you?"

Stefan stared into the distance. He gave the impression of panting, although he wasn't doing anything of the kind. "I don't know—I don't remember what I expected of you," he said angrily at last. "Except what I made you promise. I certainly didn't expect to have to stay here and watch it!"

"There," Damon said in his most distantly polite tone, "is the door. You will find it leads to a corridor, some stairs, and a place called Outside. Go Outside and then get the hell off of my territory. I'm telling you this, by the way, as the person who bled you not five minutes ago."

"You won a fight. Big deal. Nothing is going to make me leave Elena if a—a copycat vampire is around. Do you really even think there's a strange vampire in the vicinity?"

Damon shrugged. "Give me the benefit of your wisdom, little brother. What else can it be?"

"I don't know," Stefan said slowly. In the dark, his pupils filled his irises so that his eyes were only just ringed with a narrow band of green. He stared intently at Damon a moment before he added, "It could be something new. Something that came up from the Nether World. Have you ever heard of a *baobhan sith*?" He pronounced it "*baa*-van shee."

"A what?" Damon demanded. "No, don't bother to tell me. Whatever it is, it's my fault, right? If it's from the Nether World, it's on me." Suddenly Damon felt tired and sick. And . . . hungry. Yes, definitely quite hungry. He needed to feed soon.

"Look," he said almost expressionlessly. "If you won't leave my territory, at least leave the campus. Go and live in the forest the way I did in the Old Wood in Fell's Church. *But get the freaking hell out of here.* You don't belong here now, any more than I belonged to Elena's coterie last year. Can you understand?"

Stefan looked tired himself as he replied, "Just for information's sake: I wasn't trying to blame the sith creature on you. It was just a theory about why we can't find a vampire, and undoubtedly it's wrong. And I *will* leave the campus; I promise that after tonight you'll never see me again. But first I'm going to tell you the prophecies Mrs. Flowers told me. You may need them. And

I'm going to give you two things for Elena."

Damon felt dim interest in the prophecies in spite of himself. The old lady could be helpful at times. "So?"

Dragging out each word, Stefan gave two completely meaningless oracular sayings to Damon, who listened with growing disappointment and afterward commented, "How . . . quaint. I'd say she's fruity as a nutcake, but I'm sure you'd take exception."

"I thought you should know about them," Stefan repeated doggedly. "And here are the things for Elena. This locket I gave her the night we—parted. I've taken my picture out; you can replace it with one of you, if you like."

Damon examined the locket silently. The ruby red rose was certainly striking against the black diamond background. It was a nice piece of craftsmanship.

"And the second thing?" he asked, sticking the necklace in his jeans pocket.

"It's this coverlet. I had it commissioned as well. It's based on a painting she likes."

"Memoriam," Damon read. "Memory."

"Actually, it's called 'Choosing.' It's one of Elena's favorites. Somehow I found that a bit . . . ironic."

"Not anymore." Damon gave his sweetest smile. "Thank you, on Elena's behalf, for both of these. I'm sure she'll enjoy receiving them—again."

He waited a minute and then added, "You know what's really odd, though? I don't see any signs of you leaving here."

"I thought I might stay and try to put the room back together."

"Right *now*? And outrage your neighbors all over again? Just leave it! If the police ever do come, it can be part of my story. 'My own room got trashed and Elena kindly took me in.'"

"Fine, then. I'm going."

"See you around," Damon said dourly.

"No, you won't."

"Yes, I will."

* * *

"What happened? Why am I lying down?" Bonnie said abruptly into the silence that pervaded Elena's room. She reached up and touched her head. "Why am I wet and lying down?" she added querulously, as her fingers encountered the melting ice pack.

Elena looked at Meredith and nodded. Meredith, who had been standing by Bonnie's side, bent over her and spoke quietly. "You had another little . . . episode. And then you fainted and hit your head. The icepack was Damon's idea."

"Oh." Bonnie stopped trying to remove it. "What did I say this time?"

Meredith glanced at Elena, who shook her head. Meredith bit her lip.

"Bonnie . . . let's just go home now. I'll bring a pizza and you can lie down in your own bed."

There was a silence.

"It was *that* bad?" Bonnie asked in a small voice at last.

"It just doesn't need to be repeated," Elena said. "Not this evening. Listen to Meredith, Bonnie. You'll feel better soon. And thank you so much for my beautiful room."

Bonnie hesitated, but Meredith was already urging her up. Elena insisted that they take an entire pizza with them, along with the ice pack, wrapped in fresh paper towels.

"I suppose that I'd better go, too," Caroline said, and accepted a box of pizza herself, along with Elena's thanks.

After she was gone, Elena seemed to deflate, as if she were stripped of her company mood. She suggested that Matt eat some of the third pizza, and then she sat and stared into a middle distance.

Matt wasn't hungry. He was cursing himself for being a coward. He could see how shaken Elena was. He wanted to go to her and put an arm around her again—just as a friend—but he didn't quite dare while they were alone.

Although that didn't make any sense. Damon could hardly be jealous of an arm around

Elena's shoulder when he had kissed Bonnie—twice—as "shock treatment" and nothing more.

Of course, the whole shock treatment argument just led Matt's mind into more trouble. For one thing, it hadn't worked: Bonnie was still having those psychogenic trances or whatever. And for another; well, it was pretty clear that Damon liked Bonnie. A lot. Enough that, in Matt's opinion, it was fairly insulting to Elena.

Matt rubbed his forehead and blinked a few times, trying to get rid of what was a very bad feeling about his very best friend.

"Getting a headache, too?" Elena asked in a subdued voice.

"No," Matt said hastily. "No, I'm fine."

"None of us are fine tonight. Not after what happened with Bonnie."

"Maybe . . ." Matt tried to make his voice sound optimistic. "Maybe Damon will find a way to help her."

Elena just gave him a haunted look. "How?"

Matt didn't know. He had faith in Damon. Maybe too much faith, he thought abruptly. Maybe he should be trying to figure out what was causing Bonnie to behave this way, too.

It was strange. He knew that he had a hundred reasons for trusting Damon implicitly. After all, he'd given up his scholarship to Kent State in order to go to school where his best buddy was going. That was a pretty extreme thing to do, but it just demonstrated that those hundreds of reasons were highly compelling.

The only problem was that out of the hundreds, he couldn't seem to focus clearly on any particular one.

* * *

Elena tied to make small talk with Matt while they waited for Damon to return, but finally she fell silent. She didn't want to admit it, but Bonnie's latest outburst had frightened her badly.

*Blood and death . . . Sacrifice*s *. . . For fun!*

What in God's name was that supposed to mean? And what was happening to Bonnie? She

seemed to get sicker with every hour that passed.

She's a little hysterical about what happened to you—and she's a sensitive girl under stress, Damon's voice in her mind seemed to counsel sensibly.

So why does she still act this way when I'm out of the hospital and we're all having a good time? Elena asked the voice, which suddenly fell silent.

She shook her head slowly. "Matt, nothing makes sense, anymore. But . . . Damon's going to be back soon, I imagine, and he thinks he's won on this 'I'm inviting myself to half of your bed' thing."

Matt looked at her, clearly surprised. "That's what I thought, too. That's what everyone—" He broke off, flushing.

"I know what everyone thinks and I couldn't care less," Elena said shortly. "But the truth is that I have to keep my promise to Aunt Judith. I have an idea of how to convince him that I mean that. Will you help me?"

"Uh . . . sure," Matt said. He looked quite relieved, for some reason. "So, you have a plan?"

"Oh, I have plenty of plans," Elena murmured. "But we'll start with something outrageous, I think. Okay with you?"

"*Fine* with me," Matt said, with surprising enthusiasm.

* * *

Caroline closed the door of her dorm room behind herself. She put the box of delicious-smelling-if-it-didn't-have-too-many-green-peppers-on-it pizza down, then put her hands on her hips, easing her aching muscles. Oh, God, she didn't need a mirror to know how far her stomach protruded. She'd been so proud of her abs, too.

"Ouch!"

The twins had been kicking and making a ruckus in the last few days. Caroline hadn't mentioned it because she seriously, seriously, didn't want anyone feeling her swollen belly, and it

was just the kind of thing that Bonnie would insist on doing. Honestly.

Caroline sat down carefully on her bed. She stretched out the fingers of both hands to examine her lovely green nails.

"Oh, *no!*" she exclaimed in annoyance. The nail on her left pinkie had broken diagonally off at the outer edge.

If that wasn't the most aggravating thing . . . ! She huffed as she got an emery board and began to work on the uneven end of the nail.

It had probably happened while Bonnie had been doing her "crazy" routine. Caroline might be a werewolf, but at least she didn't have to act as if she were insane just to get attention. The nerve of some people!

* * *

Meredith watched Bonnie from under her eyelashes as they walked from Elena's room to theirs.

She held the pizza box in both hands, with the icepack on top. It wasn't the most efficient of arrangements, but their room was only a few steps away.

She wished that she could think of something more to do for Bonnie than wrap her in a heating blanket, apply the icepack to the bump on her head and make her some kind of soothing tea. Chamomile, maybe.

And then . . . ridiculously and most unfairly, Meredith wanted to go on a long run, all the way around campus. She felt so frustrated somehow, as if she desperately needed exercise. Her limbs were literally aching for a workout.

Which was odd, because she could never remember having exercised just for the sake of it before. She'd always gotten plenty of walking done each day and that had been fine—right?

She shouldn't be thinking about herself, anyway. She had to watch Bonnie the way an EOD technician watched a bomb and pray that Damon would figure out what on earth was going on with her friend.

Weirdly, she had an unreasonable impulse to watch Caroline like an EOD tech, as well. Or maybe just like the proverbial hawk. There was something about that girl . . . The word for what Meredith meant seemed to be on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't quite bring it to her lips.

Two syllables, she thought. Starts with W. Or maybe not. She couldn't think of any word except "wherefore" that started with the right sound and made sense when applied to an eighteen-year-old female. And what did wherefore and a hawk have in common?

* * *

Bonnie's head hurt. She'd knocked into something very hard during the time she couldn't remember. And she'd said something so awful that even Meredith didn't want to repeat it to her. Elena's face had still been pale when she'd said goodnight.

Bonnie tried to control the fear that roiled inside her. She took slow deep breaths, pretending she didn't see Meredith watching her covertly.

In, two, three, four; *hold*, two, three, four; *out*, two, three, four; *hold*, two three—*gasp!*

Bonnie felt Meredith go still at the gasp, but she didn't explain that she was trying to be calm. She knew Meredith knew that. But neither of them knew what to *do*.

I am probably going insane right this minute, Bonnie thought, and felt her guts cramp with chill. Schizophrenic? Psychotic? Me? But what else could you call it when you terrified all your friends by saying things that you didn't even remember?

Meredith was treating her as if she might spontaneously combust at any second. Bonnie could almost imagine that she could hear what Meredith was thinking. It was all about how to soothe her . . . with chamomile tea and a heating blanket and an icepack on the bump on her head. It was so like Meredith, to think that if she just did enough, Bonnie would somehow be fine . . .

And now you're imagining that you can really hear her! a voice in Bonnie's mind said sarcastically. You're already completely nuts, aren't you?

Bonnie shivered as they reached their room and Meredith opened the door for her. Her head was throbbing and she was very cold inside.

She certainly didn't want any pizza. Or any tea, for that matter.

* * *

Mrs. Flowers examined the bottom of her teacup earnestly. As her eyes moved, her forehead puckered with concern.

There was one very large clump of tea leaves. That indicated trouble. Had it been near the handle it would have been trouble of her own making; however, the clump was opposite the handle. The trouble might not be her fault, but it was still coming.

Other bits of leaf had joined to form a pattern that looked something like spectacles—no, a mask!

Deception, she thought in dismay. Lies, secrets, and base trickery.

There had been dishonesty already, but this mask was to the right of the handle which she held facing her. It meant more lies in the future. And it was close, meaning that it was coming soon.

Mrs. Flowers sighed and put the cup down as she stared sightlessly into the middle of her kitchen. She wished that dear Ma*ma* would be more helpful and that dear Grandmama would do more than snort when she asked for advice. Clearly they felt she had to decipher the first prophecies she had been given before they would vouchsafe more.

She glanced upward, toward the stairs of the boardinghouse that now had not a single boarder. She wondered what Stefan was doing at night, and wished, helplessly, that he might come back here, to a place that had been home to him for a short while.

He would be needed, she thought grimly. Everyone would need to stand together in the days ahead. Of course, that was going to be a bit difficult if no one could even recall who they actually were.

Mrs. Flowers realized that she was getting a headache.

* * *

Damon walked back to Elena's room with the coverlet rolled like a rug under his arm. He was whistling the waltz from Gounod's opera *Faust*—and he was not thinking about his brother.

Elena. Dancing witch-fire in her gold-flecked dark blue eyes. She was waiting for him in Soto Hall. Like Faust's sweetheart, Marguerite, she was a white soul, a dove, an inspiration.

Or, better still, she was like Helen of Troy in Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*, Damon thought, remembering the prophecy given by Mrs. Flowers' dear Ma*ma* to Stefan. To Elena, one could quite honestly say:

> "O, thou art fairer than the evening air
> Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars . . ."

He knocked at Elena's door as he reached her room, only to have it instantly opened by Matt. Damon stepped inside, frowning.

Matt was supposed to be watching Elena, so what was he doing standing . . .

Damon's mind broke off in mid-thought. The room was empty.

"What happened?" he demanded of Matt. "Where is everybody? Where's *Elena?"*

Matt just gaped, and Damon realized that he was holding onto the human's arm with a fair proportion of his true strength. He forced himself to let go.

"I'm over here," a slightly muffled voice came from inside the room. "Bonnie woke up and everyone else left. And none of it is Matt's fault, so leave him alone."

Damon stared, seeing for the first time that there was no turquoise and lavender spread on the bed, and that two of the four square pizza boxes had disappeared.

"I see," he said slowly. Then, rapidly picking up speed: "Good night, Matt. Thank you—really sorry about your arm. Ice it. Take some ice."

"Take a pizza, Matt," Elena's muffled voice echoed. "Goodbye."

When Matt was gone, Damon walked around the bed and looked down at the floor, where Elena was lying wrapped in the bedspread, her head on a lavender throw pillow.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"I think I'm getting some sleep—or trying to. I know it's early, but I'm tired."

"You know what I mean. What are you doing lying on the floor?"

"You informed me that you were moving onto the bed," Elena said, pulling a fold of the spread over her face as she rolled onto her side. "But I promised—I gave my word—that I wouldn't share my bed with a guy. So unless you go away, this is where I'll be."

Damon felt like hitting something unnecessarily violently. Instead, he said, "Look, I brought this coverlet for you—and another surprise."

Elena barely glanced at the coverlet. "Good. Now we each have one. Goodnight, Damon."

"I said, *and another surprise*."

"Show me in the morning. Goodnight."

"It's not even eight o'clock yet—"

"It seems much, much later to me."

Damon couldn't think of a sensible answer to that, so he simply said, as calmly as he could, "Princess, get up."

"No."

"Come on, angel. For my sake, just—just get up off the damn floor, will you?"

"No. I've got the floor; you've got the bed. And that's that."

"Elena, get *up!"*

This time she didn't answer him at all. Dropping the rolled coverlet on the lavender sheets of the bed, Damon began to crouch, intending to pick her up bodily.

Elena turned to look at him, stopping him undead in his tracks. Her lapis lazuli blue eyes were not dancing with witch-fire; they were blazing with the light of a thousand stars.

"Don't . . . even . . . think . . . about it," she said in a glacial voice.

Damon retreated with what dignity he could gather.

"Fine," he said. "Fine! I'm going to spend the night in the lounge chair. I'm sure you don't want me sharing your floor."

No answer. Damon dropped into the lounge chair in the opposite corner of the room. But it was difficult to stay seated. He was full of adrenaline and his pride was wounded. Even worse, this

setup was no good. He needed to be within arm's reach of Elena—in fact, he needed to be touching her. There was no other way to guarantee her safety. As it was, he might as well have gone to the woods like Stefan.

A minute passed. Five more slow minutes.

"Elena?"

"Go 'way."

"I need your attention for a moment."

"Attend this." A pale hand appeared above the level of the bed that separated them. It was making a gesture that, in Italy, was quite rude.

Damon succeeded in turning a chortle into a coughing spasm. He concluded that the wooden floor was uncomfortable.

Another five minutes passed, even more slowly than the last.

"Elena? Princess?"

No answer. But now that he wasn't panicking Damon could see Elena's aura in minute detail on the opposite side of the bed. She was wide awake.

"I know you're not asleep."

"How," Elena asked, sighing heavily, "could I possibly sleep when you keep enthralling me with such fascinating tidbits of conversation?"

"Fascinating or not, you should listen to me. You must be thinking about what's happening with Bonnie. I'm thinking about it, too. And I'm thinking about the news story on television."

Elena sighed again, but she seemed to thaw slightly. "Bonnie—I'm starting to believe that she needs a doctor. Not like Dr. Alpert. A psychiatrist."

"Maybe," Damon temporized, having no idea what a psychiatrist would make of Bonnie's trances. "But, you know, I have an idea about that girl at Beckley Memorial in Heron. Why don't we go and see if we can visit her tomorrow? She may have some answers that bear on what happened to you."

For a moment he thought that Elena was going to say something about missing more classes. Instead she finally murmured, "It's a good idea—*if* they'll let us speak to her. *If* she's even conscious. After all, whatever is going on with Bonnie is my fault in the first place."

"You what?"

"It's true. The—the psychogenic trances started when she first came to visit me in the hospital. Something she saw there made her . . . freak out, and she's been freaking out ever since."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard!" Damon snapped.

"Thank you," Elena blazed back. She sat up, which allowed Damon to see the top of her head. "Now you give me your theory about why she's suddenly doing this and we can see which one is more ridiculous!"

Damon shut his mouth with a click of teeth. This was beyond the call of duty. To sit here knowing that Bonnie was a witch who was being used by a malign entity—and not to be able to say a word about it—was *not* a nurturing experience.

Little brother, he thought for the hundredth time, you've put me in an impossible position. And the wave of anger that he felt for Stefan's lunacy merged with the waves of anger he was feeling for Elena's stubbornness.

"We'll go tomorrow," he said in a clipped voice. "I'm betting she *will* be awake. And meanwhile, we'll go to sleep—but not like this."

Finally, Elena was goaded into standing up. Damon immediately stood as well. At least they could face each other now.

"It's *my* room—or have you forgotten?" Elena said. "You have a perfectly good one of your own."

If only you knew, Damon thought.

"I haven't forgotten. And like I said, I don't mean any disrespect to your aunt. But after what Bonnie just said, after what we saw on the news—I'm worried about you. I need to be close to you if I'm going to—" He suddenly realized where this sentence was going.

"To take care of me," Elena finished. "Thank you very much, but I plan on taking care of myself."

Damon ground his teeth. Against a copycat vampire? he thought. Against someone who wants your blood and death, because it's fun?

All he said was: "You can't. Not while you're asleep."

"And neither can you—while you're asleep!" Elena retorted.

"I sleep very lightly," Damon said, thinking: For pity's sake, moron, just Influence her! Do it! Do it now!

"I can't break my promise," Elena said. "I would never ask *you* to go back when you'd given your word."

"What if I call your Aunt Judith and explain that I only want to be close to you so that whoever attacked you before can't—"

"*Don't you dare!* She'll end up pulling me off campus, making me come home, if I'm in that much danger. I can't understand why she hadn't already suggested something like that."

Because Stefan Influenced her not to, while he was still full of your sweet blood, Damon thought grimly. The thought was grim because he was realizing just how hungry he was, and just how long the night was going to be, given that he couldn't leave Elena.

I'd better Influence her now, while I still can, he thought. And because he was taking time deciding exactly *how* to Influence her, he made the worst mistake possible.

"I said I brought you something besides the coverlet. Here you go." He held up the locket, which sparkled in the light.

Elena took one look and went ballistic. "So now you're trying to *bribe* me to—to—?"

"What? Of course not," Damon said hastily, wrapping her in a coil of Influence. "I just want you to calm down and then lie down. On the bed. I want you to forget about this silly argument and let us both get some sleep."

What happened next was completely unexpected. "Are you *crazy?* What are you saying?

And what are you *doing*—trying to hypnotize me or something?" Elena advanced two steps on him, breaking through the tendril of Influence. "Stop it right now!"

Damon stopped it. He was shocked. He hadn't comprehended how weak he actually was. He'd skipped lunch, and of course he hadn't left Elena alone since they'd departed from the hospital.

He *couldn't* Influence her. And he was ravenous.

What in hell's name was he going to do?

"I *think*," Elena mused, stepping still closer, "that this is the bit where I kick you out of my room entirely. It's almost curfew anyway."

Damon found himself holding completely still, with every muscle tensed, like a panther before a sudden spring. "You are not going to throw me out," he said very quietly, and added, after a pause, "princess."

"Didn't say throw. Said kick," Elena replied, and it was true that the gold flecks in her lapis eyes grew brighter. Damon had no idea how she managed it, but the fact was that it happened.

"Throw, kick—"

"Meredith," Elena said composedly, "taught me some *killer* kicks. Because of . . . because she's . . ." Her voice trailed off and her pupils widened, but she never took her eyes off Damon. "I forget why now, but she did teach me some."

Oh, damn. *Damn*, little brother! You screwed up royally. Motor memory again. Plus an association with Meredith that you didn't catch. "Elena, I'm not going to hurt you, but I'm not going to let you hurt me, either. And there's nothing on earth that could make me walk out of this room."

"Yes, well, if I do it right, you won't actually be walking. Hobbling, probably. Possibly crawling."

Damon had thought he couldn't get more tense. He'd been wrong. "And that's what you want?" he demanded.

"No, it is not what I want!" Elena almost shouted. "But I've tried everything else but saying 'pretty please with sugar and sprinkles' and I seriously doubt that that's going to work!"

"You're right," Damon breathed. "You're right. Pleading equals big fail. But there's a reason I'm not going to leave you, and the reason is that I love you. And you can't get around that: you can't kick it down, or throw it out, or climb over it, or scramble under it. You can't win this fight." You're thinking about dealing with Stefan, he added silently, in his own mind. That's the opponent you're imagining, someone full of honor and terrified of harming you. But I'm the other guy.

"If you did love me," Elena said, and there was genuine bitterness in her tone, "then you'd allow me to keep my word to my aunt. You'd leave like a gentleman."

There, Damon thought. I knew it. She has no clue.

He went slightly, spontaneously insane, caught between exasperation and exhilaration. He hadn't seen this particular Elena for over a month and he was realizing just now how much he'd missed her.

"You don't know who I am," he said softly. "Let me explain. To, ah, thoroughly misquote the erudite Brenna Yovanoff: I am electricity itself. I live with entire galaxies moving through my bloodstream. I have never yet been impressed, my princess, by earthly royalty or heavenly crown. I love you with a desperate fire that I carry like an arch-angel's flaming sword. I love you the way the Greeks burned Troy for your namesake . . . Helena."

There was a pause. The gold flecks swam in Elena's eyes. Damon had the feeling that she might put down the weapon of her wit, as it were, and quit the field of battle on his say-so alone.

But Elena was Elena. Proud as Lucifer and twice as beautiful as he was reputed to be in the beginning. Her name meant light as his meant light-bearer. She was the pure element, and no one had ever wielded her yet.

She took the last step toward him. He could feel the heat of her body on his skin. She was wearing jeans so distressed they were almost white and a wine-colored camisole. Cabernet-colored. He had no idea where her sweater was, but he knew she needed it. *He* needed it. His canines were sharpening.

"I love you the way a thorn loves the rumor of a rose," she said. "You think I'm so young, so

pristine, so *moonlit*. But I love you the way a pyromaniac loves napalm. I could kill you in a heartbeat if love was truly war, and you'd laugh and kiss your hand to me as you died. I lost my heart to whatever you really are behind the nice guy act, but we've always been on opposite sides. I wouldn't be surprised if my blood went missing because you *drank* it . . . Demon."

Damon tried to keep his eyes off the camisole and the milk-pale skin directly above it. She thought he was two and a half years older than she was, when it was closer to twice two and a half centuries. She wanted to fight on his own territory, to play in the big league, and she had not the slightest idea of what he'd seen and done in his time. She needed to know what she was dealing with.

Before he lost his senses and perforated one of her arteries he remembered the hipflask of Black Magic. He'd refilled it from a bottle in the Ferrari. Now he drew it out of his pocket and drained half of the contents in one long swallow. Then he blinked a few times and sneezed as the sensation of starvation receded.

"Tyger, tyger, burning bright, in the forests of the night . . ." she mocked him. The cabernet camisole was rippling with her quick breathing. "What immortal hand or eye could frame *thy* fearful symmetry?"

Damon made a supreme effort. Black Magic was spreading through his body, soothing him.

"Okay. We're both smart; we're both thieves like jackdaws; and we're both fairly worked up. However—"

"You started it," she cut him off. "But I'll finish it. I don't care if you're the Devil himself. You still can't sleep in my damn *bed*."

"Stop it, now, Elena. You know exactly who I am. We've been together for almost a year—and you're still a virgin, which ought to tell you something."

"A year? Then why can't I *remember* it? Why can't I remember even one full day?" she demanded suddenly, half fiercely and half wailing.

Stefan, I am going to kill you. Damon didn't dare send the message even on a tight beam in case Elena picked up on it. She was in a Mood, and he wouldn't put random telepathy past her. Right

now, she was a latent everything.

This is what happens when you take all the memories away from someone and don't substitute some fantasy, he thought bitterly. Stefan, of course, would think of that as cheating. But—congratulations!—he was now close to driving a second young girl to insanity.

Elena was panting. The cabernet camisole was developing troughs and crests from wavelength interference. Damon recognized an imminent explosion when he saw one.

She was still harping on the *Tyger, tyger* theme, making her way toward some quite terrifying conclusion.

> "When the stars threw down their spears
> And water'd heaven with their tears:
> Did He smile his work to see?
> Did He who made the Lamb make thee?"

Oh, dear. She was serious, staring into his eyes as if his soul was perfectly accessible and she only needed to watch the sparkle of synapses to trace his thoughts. This wouldn't have worried him so much if she hadn't once been to Completely and Utterly Dead—a realm he had never visited. *Almost* completely and utterly dead he understood fairly well, and even that had given him the ability to see into other worlds.

When she'd come back from death she'd extemporaneously developed the ability to explode planets. The Guardians of the Celestial Court were certain that they'd taken that gift away from her by clipping her wings.

Damon wished he had more respect for the Guardians.

"All right," he told her. "The answers to your questions are: first, I prefer to think so; and second, most probably not. I am trying not to bullshit you here."

Elena closed her eyes, which was unfair on two counts. For one thing she could no longer see the wild and winsome smile he was holding steady in order to bullshit her. And for another, her eyelashes were as dark as her hair was bright and long enough to cast shadows on her cheek. Gross injustice, that was.

"Okay," she breathed. "Now you tell me what you've done to me during the last year."

No freaking way. He couldn't even get out of it by saying "almost everything." Elena was Elena; she'd want a list. She'd want a *numbered* list.

During the last calendar year he'd terrorized her and worshipped her; he'd owned her as a slave and acknowledged her as more of an equal than anyone he'd known before in his life. When she had been most vulnerable he had, for novelty's sake, even tried being fair to her.

When she had saved his misspent life from almost utter and complete death he'd snapped at her like a wounded coyote in a trap. Before that, when she'd courted death by hypothermia, he'd burned every erg of his Power to warm her. Once, he'd given her his jacket for keeps, but she'd thrown it back at him from a third-story window for thrashing Stefan.

She had continually challenged him, and every time she did he'd kissed her, or tried to. He'd kissed her when he'd healed her wounds. He'd kissed her when he was hungry, and when he was lonely, and when they'd evaluated tactics together. All in all, there had been quite a lot of kissing.

Elena still had her eyes shut. She wasn't weeping; she was weighing options. She didn't have Meredith's book smarts but she was the finest general since Charlemagne, and she was literate, which the old emperor hadn't been. She thought in terms of enfilade and defilade quite naturally.

She could certainly outthink Damon. She'd started doing it the second time they'd met. Only overwhelming superior force or sheer serendipitous accident could defeat her.

Elena opened her eyes. She'd fallen into a stance that Meredith had undoubtedly taught her in the last weeks. Her expression was not confident, but it was stone-cold determined.

But she had no idea of his speed or strength or dexterity. Despite her accusations, she had only mortal creatures for comparison. Now, she'd finished her calculations and decided on a gambit. The truth was that he'd be hard put not to hurt her if she wanted to fight that way. She always fought as dirty as he did; often trying to force him to break her bones or cut her throat just to make a point.

"Well?" she asked. "*J'accuse!* Are you going to tell me? Or do you want me to start guessing?"

Switches flipped in Damon's brain. The conversation had gone out of control when she'd started talking about God not making Tygers and he hadn't called a mental health helpline. He no longer had a choice.

"No," he said, and left her for a moment, doubtless wondering *"No"* to what? He drank the rest of the Black Magic and prepared to burn his life energy.

"I'll guess. You are—"

"Princess, I'm sorry, but you need to forget this whole conversation."

"Oh, don't say sorry. You were doing really well until you said sorry."

"You are now forgetting our entire conversation," he repeated, expressionlessly because she was going to forget whatever he said and the way he said it. "You are forgetting everything that happened since I came in the door and Matt left. You're remembering that we ate pizza together and watched TV and then we fell asleep. Both of us, lying on your bed with our clothes on."

"Liar!"

Damon took the Power he'd worked up, coiled it, and cast a tendril of Influence around her like a cowboy roping a recalcitrant heifer. Except that, since the energy was still part of him, it hurt like hell. He ignored the pain. He couldn't outsmart her, so he was going with the overwhelming force route.

"You're forgetting right . . . now." He pulled the tendril tight, and it held. It felt like restraining someone by using your own entrails.

"No! Stop it! What are you *doing*?"

"You're forgetting that I told you to forget."

"*No,"* she keened, drawing out the syllable. She tried one last stratagem: flirting. "Damon, *please*, no . . ."

"It's for your own mental stability, princess. Besides, I owe you. There is—ah—blood red in my ledger." He laughed a little. He was used to amusing himself alone around and about Fell's Church while Stefan and Elena did whatever they liked together. He was a loner by disposition; a

lover by necessity.

Elena was still fighting. "I can't—I need to write down—"

He put himself in the way of her desk and whiteboard. "What would you write? You don't keep a diary any longer, you know. We ate pizza; we watched some old movie on your new TV. We fell asleep on the bed."

Elena shut her eyes and swayed. Damon locked his teeth and drew out another long filament of life-energy. He tossed it around her, pulled it taut. Simultaneously he held her still with both hands on her shoulders.

"We ate microwaved pizza and watched TV. What old movie did we watch?" He shut his own eyes, wincing, devoutly hoping he hadn't just made a fatal mistake. She was perfectly capable of saying *Dracula*.

"We watched . . . *Jurassic Park*."

"What was it about?"—suspiciously. He wasn't some pervert who fondled girls in the darkness of movie theaters. He liked to see his conquests clearly, and amplified soundtracks hurt his exquisite hearing.

"Dinosaurs, of course. What rock do you live under? But, A, the special effects were old-fashioned; and, Two, Michael Crichton's misogyny spoiled it a bit. The T-Rex was quite nice, though."

"Forget that I asked what it was about; also the ' what rock' line. And . . . A and Two?" If her thinking was genuinely disordered he might have to start again from scratch. He didn't know how he could live through that without biting her.

"A and Two? I already told—somebody—about that. You; it had to be. I've got déjà vu going on."

"Okay. That's fine. What did we do after the movie?"

"We . . . got tired."

Damon shifted his grip to her upper arms. It was time for the ultimate inquisition. "*And*?"

"You said . . . you said, 'Goodnight, princess.'"

As usual, Elena was dancing to the beat of her own self-selected orchestra.

Feeling chill and desiccated as the Dry Valleys in Antarctica, Damon was just deciding that he was going to have to Influence her again when she spoke in a whisper.

"You gave me a locket. You fastened it around my neck. I said, 'It's beautiful.' And then we . . . got sleepy. I . . . fell . . ."

Elena fell.

Face turned up, eyes drifting shut, she collapsed toward him lips first. It was no particular trouble to guide her into a kiss.

Damon felt he deserved the kiss after everything he'd been through. He resisted his temptation to bite and enjoyed the warmth and sweetness that she seemed quite happy to share. For a born general, Elena was surprisingly cuddly.

When she fell asleep in the middle of the embrace, Damon automatically picked her up. Girls fell asleep all the time while he held them. Fangs were terrific tranquilizers.

He carried her to the lavender-sheeted bed and put her on it. He considered—just for a second—putting the rolled-up coverlet of Stefan's beside her as a makeshift sword to separate them, but he hadn't just put himself through hell to sleep without skin contact.

He draped the velvet coverlet over her instead. It clung to her every slim line and curve as if it adored her.

Damon fished the rose locket out again and carefully fastened it around her beautiful, exquisitely blue-veined neck. He took half the cold pizza out of the last of the square boxes and put it on a paper plate in the hallway. Eventually someone would come along and throw it away, or possibly eat it.

Finally, he dragged the lavender and turquoise bedspread over to his side of the bed. He had just enough strength to lie down and shake the flowered spread over both of them. Then, turning toward Elena, he slowly reached out and took her hand. She didn't stir.

He'd won. Hoorah for him. He was so tired he couldn't even think about being hungry.

He fell asleep.

* * *

Stefan was walking in Dyer Wood. He didn't go too far in. He wanted to stay where he could watch Elena's aura, which was easy right at the moment, but would become harder as his Power level dropped. He probed the forest automatically as he went, but found nothing of interest, not even a single malach. Certainly there were werewolves slinking around, but that was only natural, and they could be safely ignored.

No sign of anything like a baobhan sith.

He paused for a moment, wishing he'd pressed on and explained to Damon that the exotic name simply referred to a faery woman in Scottish folklore. It was something he'd come across deep in Bonnie's memories, and which he'd promptly erased. The faery was supposed to have green eyes and a green dress, and to use her long fingernails to draw blood from her victims.

Damon had been in no frame of mind to listen in any case, he thought.

Satisfied that there was no danger in the wood as a whole, Stefan set out to find a tree. He inspected sturdy specimens of oak, black walnut, hickory, and elm. Almost none of the trees in the wood had yet begun to flare into their fall colors. They were all as green as the conifers, with only a straggling sapling here and there giving any promise of the conflagration to come.

I can't believe I'm doing this, Stefan thought as he stopped before an enormous oak and considered it. After several minutes of evaluation he began to climb the forest giant like a cat, looking for a flat and comfortable branch.

I'm actually sleeping in a *tree*, when there's a perfectly decent mattress in my dorm room.

This was Damon's bailiwick, or at least it had been when Damon had visited Fell's Church. Damon had always enjoyed being on his own: lurking silently in the shadows; only emerging when prodigious danger threatened those he cared about, or when he thought he could stun the resident humans with some clever bit of flamboyance. Damon liked being invisible most of the time and

wouldn't tolerate simply walking through ordinary life when nothing much was happening.

Damon was a diva.

Stefan, on the other hand, had always preferred his simple but comfortable room in Mrs. Flowers' boardinghouse. There he had stayed safely out of the elements—and later, had stayed with the reborn Elena.

I gave all that away, Stefan thought numbly. Damon has it now. He's sleeping in Elena's bed. Elena's friends—my friends—think they're his friends. And I did it all to myself, with the power of my own mind. There's no one else to blame.

He could hear Mrs. Flowers reciting the words Ma*ma* had given her from Christopher Marlowe's play, *Doctor Faustus:*

> "*Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.*
> *Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God,*
> *And tasted the eternal joys of Heaven,*
> *Am not tormented with ten thousand hells,*
> *In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss?"*

I tasted the eternal joys of heaven with Elena. If God exists, He was behind her return from the dead. I used to be so happy, and I didn't even appreciate it properly. Now I'm like someone who's lost an arm or leg, but can still feel it, and it hurts. My phantom heart is eternally caught in an agonizing, muscle-clenched position.

I gave it all to Damon, everything that was best about my life. I did it of my own will. Worse, *I'm* the devil in Mrs. Flowers' prophecy. I'm thoroughly damned. When I let my thirst for Elena's blood take over, I committed an unforgiveable sin and lost my right to Paradise.

Of course, after that all he could think about were lines from John Milton's *Paradise Lost.*

For Elena:

> *Grace was in all her steps, heaven in her eye,*
> *in every gesture dignity and love.*

For what they had had together:

> *Wild above rule or art, enormous bliss.*

And for his prospects now:

Farewell happy fields, where joy forever dwells:
Hail, horrors, hail.

Hail, horrors, hail! The words kept echoing inside Stefan's head, like a cheap special effect. He realized that however awful he felt right now, there was worse in store.

Once I regained my senses I didn't have a choice. I did what I had to do, he tried to tell himself sternly. Damon's the only one who can protect her as she needs to be protected. And he gave me his solemn word . . .

Thinking about that, about what it meant for Elena, Stefan leaned his head back against the oak's trunk. He could have groaned out loud, but there was no one to hear but the mice and other nocturnal creatures that scuttled on the ground and all about him.

He forced his body to relax, limb by reluctant limb. He was hoping to find some peace in the black oblivion of sleep.

His mind kept echoing the words, refusing to let go.

Hail, horrors, hail.

"The mind is its own place, and in itself can make
a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven…"
— John Milton

To be continued in

Evensong

Part Two:
The War of Roses